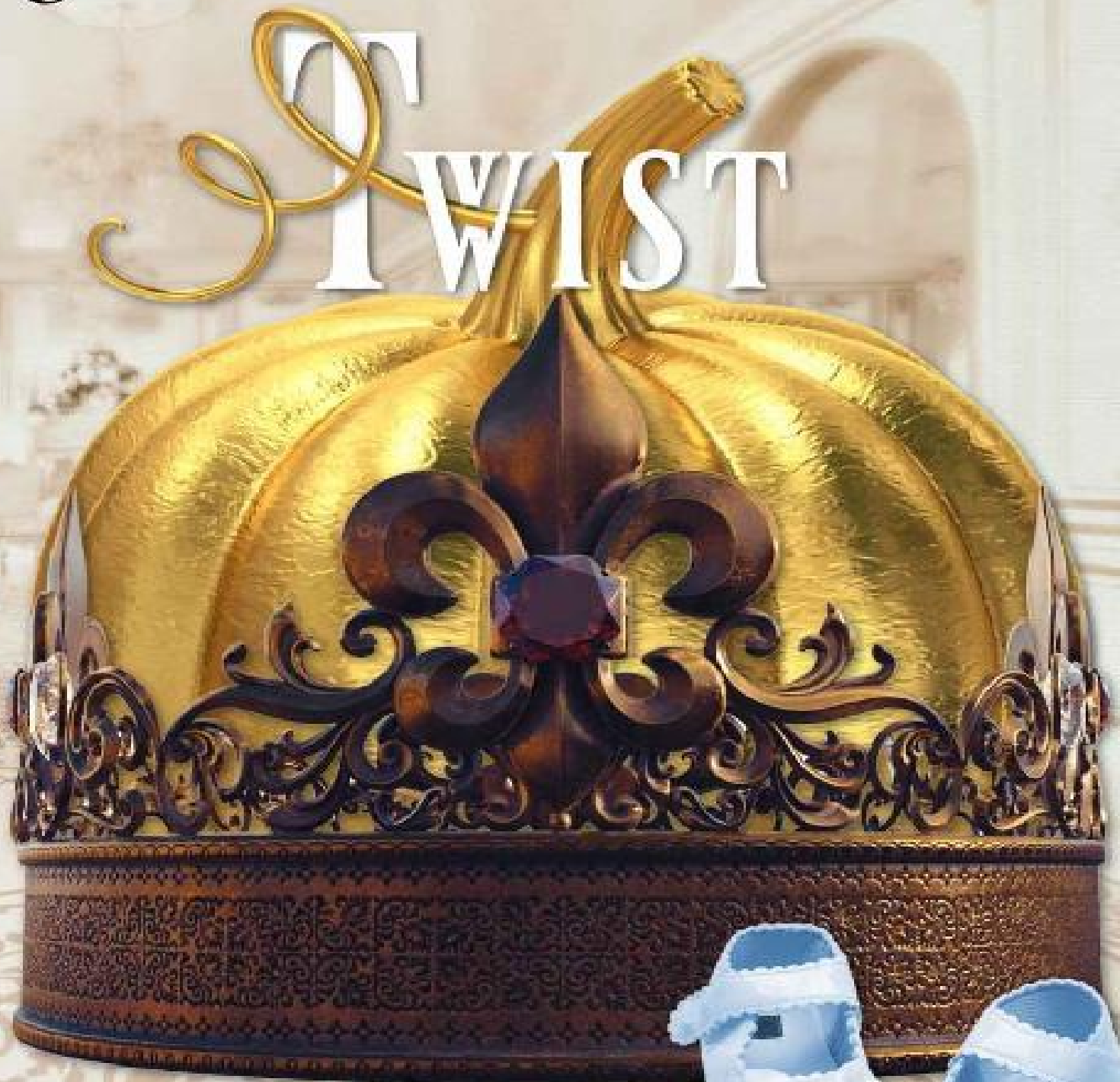


A
Cinderella
TWIST



K S T H O M A S

A CINDERELLA TWIST

By

K.S. Thomas

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For my favorite Cinderella...



CHAPTER ONE

GREER
“I’m borrowing your half and half!” I call out as I burst into the apartment across the hall from mine and make a beeline for the fridge. I moved past the knocking and asking phase about three weeks after Chase and Abbas moved in. And that was seven years ago.

“I don’t care if you keep it, as long as you stop shouting,” a furious hiss returns just as I swing the refrigerator door back into place.

My back is to the living room, and whatever angry demon I accidentally summoned here on my quest for creamer this morning. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, hands moving up in surrender, the right gripping the carton of half and half tight. Just in case I need to use it as a weapon at some point.

“What are you doing?” the demon’s hiss sounds more human now, and less angry.

“Trying to save my soul and still have my morning coffee,” I answer, slowly venturing a look over my shoulder. “Or are you a burglar? Is that why I can’t make noise? Are you worried my being loud will wake someone and get you caught? Because if you are, I should tell you, you’re wasting your time in this apartment. 6B two flights up has much better shit and the two dudes who live there are already at work this time of morning. Even on a Sunday.” I turn all the way around to ease the kink starting in my neck from staring at him over my shoulder. “Also, a bomb could go off here on a weekend morning, no one in this apartment would wake up. It’s why I don’t waste time at the door with formalities. And I only even announced my intentions to borrow half and half for principal sake. In case someone asks down the road.” I ramble when I’m nervous. And my judgement sucks before coffee. I can see where the combination has potential here to get me killed to shut me up or set me free just to make me go away.

Meanwhile, the only response I get from my rant is a frown and a frazzled but clearly frustrated, “What?”

I lower my hands, doing away with all signs of surrender. Now that I’m looking at him, he doesn’t seem so demon-like. Nor does he appear to be mid-thieving this place. Given he’s wearing nothing but a towel, he’s not exactly dressed for it. Also, he’s wearing nothing but a towel. It’s worth the repeat. It’s also worth mentioning that between the endless muscles and flawless skin, no amount of coffee is going to help me focus today after the sight of him. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“I should be asking you that,” he points out, tension returning to his voice. It’s deep and gravelly, and definitely lent itself well to the demon theory, though, admittedly sounds sexier now that it’s paired with a half-naked hot guy with wet, slicked back, blond hair long enough to reach the nape of his neck, the perfect amount of stubble to qualify as rugged (or maybe it’s just the strong jawline and full lips that make the lack of shaving work so well) and piercing blue eyes that make you miss the ocean just looking at them. “You’re the one busting in on *me*, not the other way around.”

“Yeah,” I concede to this obvious truth, “but I know for a fact you don’t live here, so I’m not so sure you’re really more entitled to have your question answered than I am.”

He sighs and with the exhale his defenses fall away. “Greer?”

Kind of veering back toward my demon theory now. “How do you know my name?”

“Because I told him our neighbors Talks-a-lot-Greer and Steals-your-food-deliveries-Mallory would probably pass through our kitchen sooner rather than later,” Chase answers, scratching the back of his head as he does his half-awake shuffle out of the bedroom and into the main living area.

“Actually, you called her Talks-a-lot-of-*crazy*-Greer,” the dude corrects. Apparently, not a demon after all. Just a stickler for details with a good memory and solid observation skills.

“I mean, that’s hurtful,” I point out, eyes wide, “in a painfully honest sort of way.”

“Yeah, I’m not awake enough yet to pretend to care about your fake hurt feelings, Greer,” Chase mutters, coming to a stop at the center of the living room and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. I notice his eyes aren’t so much directed at me while he’s talking as they are at my hands. “Can I assume based on my creamer in your hand that you have coffee made already at your place?”

“You should assume I have coffee made period.” Though, I forgot for a moment there. “Things get tricky when you assume that I will share.” I take a poignant step backwards toward the door. “With you.”

“You’re seriously going to take the man’s half and half and not give him coffee?” The other dude. The half-naked dude. The not-a-demon dude. The apparently-not-robbing-the place, dude. The -

“I need a name,” I announce loudly, interrupting my own train of inner crazy and startling them both.

“Can you please stop with the shouting?!” The angry hissing returns, but I don’t have time to respond beyond shooting him a dirty look. I’m far more interested in what Chase has to say. He’s the one I’m counting on for answers here.

Only Chase looks more clueless than he did two days ago when I woke him up at four a.m. to ask him if the box of Cocoa Krispies I found in his pantry was still good. It wasn’t. Cereal was stale as hell. “A name for what?”

“A name for the half-naked man in your apartment who’s been hassling me since I strolled in here to grab my half and half,” I state what I deem to be quite obvious.

“I’m sorry, *your* half and half?” The other dude. Again. With the stickling and observing.

“Possession is nine-tenths of the law, buddy,” I quip, darting my eyes briefly in his direction before I zero in on Chase again.

He’s grinning now. “Oh, right. For a second there, I forgot you two haven’t met.” He shrugs, still clearly amused by something. “Just, the way you two are going at it, kind of felt like you already knew each other.” He chuckles and starts walking again, making our little triangle standoff smaller with each step he takes. “Greer, this is Lachlan. My brother. Lachlan, you obviously already know, but this is Greer, my talks-a-lot-of-crazy, neighbor.” He clasps his hands together and nods, giving me a satisfied smirk. “Feel better now?”

“Yes.” No. I don’t. That answered nothing. In fact, I now have more questions than I did before. But, repeatedly being referred to as the girl who talks a lot of crazy is curbing my enthusiasm for pursuing my curiosities. At least while Lachlan is present. Lachlan. He looks like a Lachlan. He *does* not look like he’s Chase’s brother. Or distant cousin. Or shares any DNA with him, period.

“Feel appeased enough to share your coffee?” Lachlan asks. His tone is still awfully stern for someone asking me for my morning brew.

“Not with you,” I snip. “Also, what is your noise sensitivity issue? Am I going to be told to shush every time I come over? Because I’m not going to be fond of that and it will absolutely cut into my willingness to share coffee with anyone residing in this unit.”

“Is it going to cut into your willingness to help yourself to things from my fridge?” Chase asks, still smirking.

I scoff, too appalled to form words.

Then, the silence I leave in my state of mock shock is filled by yet another voice. A much, much smaller one. And it utters a word I haven’t heard spoken inside this apartment since Abbas dated

Weird Kayla.

“Daddy?”

Yeah. That’s what made her weird.

Lachlan’s expression changes in an instant when he responds. “Coming.” Then he glares at me and adds, “I don’t have a noise sensitivity issue. I *did* have a sleeping child,” before rushing past Chase toward the hall leading to the other two bedrooms.

“What. Is. Happening?” I squeal whisper at Chase as soon as Lachlan is out of sight. “You have a brother? And you’re an uncle? Do I even *know* you?”

“Calm down.” Even as he’s saying it, he’s moving again, hands reaching for my hips and turning me around to usher me from the apartment. “Coffee first. Talking second.”

Seems like the responsible course of action here. So, I nod and let him lead me across the hall and into my own place. As soon as we’re inside, I yell, “Mal! Chase has a smokin’ hot secret brother who happens to be someone’s baby daddy and he’s about to tell us all about him.”

Mallory, my roommate, and more specifically, best friend of the last eight years, opens the bathroom door and comes wandering out, hair in a towel turban-style and wearing only a t-shirt and underwear thus far. Normal attire around here in the mornings, and unlike my run-in with nearly naked Lachlan, not all that exciting to anyone, least of all Chase. “Chase has no siblings. I’ve heard his dad’s ‘my one lucky swimmer’ story often enough to be certain of this.” We’ve all heard it. Apparently, there was a baseball injury involving his groin area during college. Allegedly, there were no survivors. But then there was that *one* lucky swimmer. And here we are. Blessed with Chase and his dependable grocery shopping skills.

“Correct,” Chase confirms, gesturing for me to do the thing and pour the coffee. “I am my father’s only child.”

“Ah...but not your mother’s,” I conclude dramatically like it’s a game of Clue and I’m about to call out the killer for committing murder in the library with the candelabra.

“Not my mother’s.” He welcomes the full cup I hand him, cream and honey already stirred in the way he likes. “My mother, unlike my father, had two children. Lachlan with her first husband,” he explains, pausing to have a sip, “and then, three years later, me. With my dad.”

“I mean, you didn’t need to include that your dad is your dad,” Mallory points out dryly, fixing herself a mug of coffee as well. Not that it requires much fixing. She drinks it black. Like a psychopath. “But you could include why you’ve never mentioned this mysterious brother in all the years we’ve known you.”

“And why he’s suddenly here now,” I add.

“Um.” Chase looks like he’s contemplating our questions. They weren’t really all that complicated though. “I guess I don’t really talk about him much.” He shrugs, blowing it off, like it’s normal to forget to mention your siblings for seven years. “He went to live with his dad after he turned eighteen. That was kind of the deal my mom made with him. Lachlan got to grow up with us, but then he had to go live with his dad when he was of age.”

I frown. If this *was* a game of Clue, I’d be back at square one. “What kind of custody arrangement covers adulthood?”

“Oh.” Chase waves his hand like I’ve concluded something crazy. Again. “It wasn’t an official custody thing. He wanted him to move back to learn the family business. It’s a generational thing. They keep passing it down. I guess it’s a pretty big deal.” He rolls his eyes, like he has his doubts about this. “Anyway, that’s what happened. Lachlan turned eighteen. Moved to Linden. And he hasn’t

been back much since.” He slides into a stool at the breakfast bar and starts to peruse the box of donuts we stole from his kitchen yesterday.

“I’m sorry. Where’s Linden?” I ask, wondering if it would be too outrageous to tell him not to eat the chocolate covered chocolate one because I want it.

“Europe. It’s a little island in the Scandinavian section.” He chooses a jelly filled and I internalize my sigh of relief. “It’s cold as shit there, but really pretty.”

Mallory reaches past him into the box to retrieve the last Boston crème. “The nonchalant way you’re telling this very non-nonchalant story is super suspicious, by the way.”

“Only because you hang around crazy-pants here too much,” he says, mouth full of donut and spitting powdered sugar. “It’s really as basic as it sounds. My mother fell in love with a European guy while doing the hike across Europe after graduation thing. They were married for like two seconds, realized it was crazy because she was way young and he was way older and they barely knew each other, but you know, knew each other just well enough to make a baby. Got divorced. She came home to the states. Had Lachlan. Met my dad. Had me. End of story.”

“Until Lachlan up and disappears on his eighteenth birthday,” I throw in with dramatic flair. I’m really feeling the clue vibes this morning.

“He didn’t disappear,” Chase argues. “Just because you didn’t know where he was, or that he existed, doesn’t mean I haven’t been in touch with him this whole time. Or that Abbas hasn’t known him all along.”

“But you said he hasn’t been back much,” Mallory points out, clearly still as skeptical as I am.

“He hasn’t. Work keeps him really busy.” Chase shrugs. “But my work doesn’t. And I get holidays off, plus long summer breaks. So, I go to him.”

“You mean, your fancy European ski vacations are to visit your brother?”

He laughs. “Yeah. I’m a teacher. You really think I could afford to take those if I wasn’t skipping the cost of hotels and car rentals?”

“Hm.” Mallory looks like she’s ready to accept this story at face value. “I have wondered about that. But I didn’t want to be an ass and ask.”

“Right. Because not wanting to be an ass is the sort of thing you two worry about constantly.” He nods, his brows climbing his forehead. “It shows. All the time.”

Mallory doesn’t use words to respond. Instead, she lets her finger do the talking.

“But for real,” I bring the conversation back around to its origin. “Lachlan is your brother. By blood.”

“You could be a little less disbelieving of the fact that I’m related to a man who looks like a Viking God of some sort.”

Chase does look woefully puny and pasty compared to his older brother. But I don’t point either of those things out. “I’m just saying. You have brown hair and brown eyes. He’s blond and blue-eyed. You don’t exactly scream twins.” I turn away toward the coffee maker and refill my cup before I go on, “Unless we’re talking that movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito. Then it screams twins. Loudly.”

“Wow.”

“I know. That’s what this is for me too. Just one ‘wow’ moment after the next.” I take a sip. “Now let’s move on to the kid part.”



“SORRY, DID WE WAKE you?” I leave out the ‘again’ when I notice Abbas still has his eyes scrunched closed and is opting to blindly stumble down the hall toward the bathroom Monroe and I only just vacated.

“Greer,” he grumbles his one-word response.

“Right.” Even if I’d like to blame her, it’s probably not entirely her fault she woke the entire household on her mission to steal half and half this morning. If I hadn’t engaged, she would have been in and out of here and none would have been the wiser. Until they made coffee. I don’t know what Greer’s return policy is with the items she borrows.

I watch as Abbas passes us in his zombie-like state before my eyes drop to the small human hugging my left leg. She’s not much more awake than he is. Not that I’m surprised. After a long and unexpected day of traveling, we didn’t arrive here until well after midnight. I’d hoped Monroe would sleep through most of our trip, but I underestimated how much she’d pick up on my anxiety. Instead of resting, she was antsy and restless most of the journey, leading to a meltdown fully worthy of the looming terrible twos before she finally crashed an hour after we got to my brother’s place.

“How about some breakfast?” I ask, bending down to scoop her up. “Maybe a banana?”

“Boohs-berries,” she counters, looking especially grumpy this morning.

“I’ll see if we have blueberries,” I promise, making a mental note to check Greer’s fridge if I don’t find any here. It’s a leave no stone unturned kind of morning. Kind of year, if I’m being honest.

“Where’s Chase?” Abbas mutters from behind me. I’m still mid-search of their refrigerator when I turn around to face him.

“Went across the hall for coffee.”

Abbas grunts in response, but he’s slowly starting to look more awake as he meanders through the kitchen and keeps going for the front door.

“Oh, hey,” I call out as his hand reaches for the handle, “think you could see if they have any blue berries while you’re over there?”

Abbas stops trying to leave and instead retraces his steps back into the kitchen, making a sharp left at the counters and passing the center island to meet me at the fridge. “Chase hides the more expensive items.” He grins, opening the deli drawer and pulling out several packets of cheese and lunch meat before he retrieves a solid yellow container I assumed contained butter. “Here. He just picked these up at the farmer’s market yesterday. Washed and everything.”

“Thank you. You’re a lifesaver.” I take the Tupperware and pop off the lid before I hold it out to Monroe who greedily goes for the berries with both hands, picking up one with each thumb and pointer finger. Normally, I’d set her down to eat, but this place isn’t exactly toddler friendly. At all. “And not just with the berries.” I showed up here with zero warning, at one in the morning with a screaming child. Sure, Chase is my brother, but Abbas didn’t have to let us stay.

“No worries, bro. You’re family, right?” He starts for the door again. “But just so I can mentally prepare...how long do you plan on staying? Like, do we need to babyproof this place?”

I laugh. “Absolutely not. We’re just passing through. Promise.” If all goes as planned, I’ll be back on a plane and headed home by Friday. And Monroe, she’ll be home too. Her real home. With her real father.



CHAPTER TWO

GREER
“Someone better pour me a cup of coffee,” Abbas announces with a grand entrance of swinging doors and a robe flying like a cape behind him. He must have run from his place to ours to make it do that.

“Here.” I hand him an empty mug and point at the coffee maker which is percolating for the second time today already. “Should have just enough in it to satisfy your current needs. Pour away.”

Abbas takes a brief dramatic pause, accepting the lack of servitude to be found here in our kitchen, then marches on with the same amount of flair he flew in here with.

“There’s a baby in my kitchen,” he mutters as he fills his cup. “I really thought that would garner me more sympathy from you people.”

Chase shrugs. “It’s my kitchen, too.”

“Greer fixed you a cup,” Mal points out.

Abbas gasps in mock disgust.

“Calm down,” Chase says, rolling his eyes. “It wasn’t because of the baby.”

“It was kind of because of the baby,” I contradict him for entertainment’s sake.

“Because you wanted to know about it. And my brother.” Chase flashes his eyes at me. “Not because you were offering me any sort of baby condolences. Even though you woke her. And you clearly haven’t been around when she’s tired.”

Abbas pretends to collapse against the cupboards. “May Allah show mercy and let that baby be fond of naps. I can’t take another night like the last one.”

“You two are ridiculous,” Mal says dryly, shaking her head as the pity flows from her gaze, taking turns landing on both of them with each swing left to right.

“Fine.” Abbas stands, looking perfectly normal. As if there was no tantrum meets desperate prayer to be seen here ten seconds ago. “Just tell me you have the rest of my almond milk stashed in your fridge.”

Mal’s gaze drops until it sticks on the trashcan and the empty carton sitting right on top. “I would. But I’m not the sort of friend who would lie to you.”

The sour look on Abbas’s face when he reaches for the half and half instead will stay with me and make me chuckle for a long time to come. “You don’t even drink the shit.”

“But I enjoy it oh so much in my bedtime oatmeal.” She grins. “I don’t know what you’re so upset about. We pay into the grocery fund. If you don’t have a backup handy, that’s on Chase.”

This seems to remind him of something. “Oh, before I forget, you need more blueberries.”

Chase instantly stares daggers at Mal. “You found my stash.”

“I did not.” She pulls herself taller. “But you had a stash? And no one told me? You know I love fresh fruit in my oatmeal. And blueberries are brain food! We all know I could use more of that before my big interview tomorrow!”

“The baby’s eating them for breakfast,” Abbas cuts in before things get any crazier. “And you’re a freaking genius, Mal. Your brain is fine even without blueberries.”

He’s not wrong. As much as she dumbs it down for the rest of us most of the time, it’s hard to forget she’s a brain on legs when you’ve been a student alongside her. Which I was. Though not in the same classes. Or even at the same college. Still, we were roommates. I saw the girl study. Heard

about the classes she took. The papers she wrote. The endless high scores she reaped on every test and exam ever placed before her.

“He’s right. You’re going to nail that interview. And then you’re going to have to move out.” I make a sad face.

“What? Why?”

“Because,” I say like it’s obvious, “I can’t be a struggling actress living with the woman in charge of a lab developing top secret medical shit destined to reform organ transplanting as we know it. My self-esteem will not survive. I’ll need a self-esteem transplant. And I don’t think you and your fellow nerds know how to do those yet.”

“I’m not moving out.” Of course not.

“Hey, speaking of people who are moving,” I transition not at all as smoothly as I’d like to pretend, “How long before your hot brother moves along to somewhere else?”

“About thirty seconds,” Lachlan says, from the doorway. And the door I didn’t hear open. “Just came for a cup of coffee since it didn’t seem like anyone was going to bring me one.” He’s wearing pants now. And a shirt. I’m somewhat disgusted with how little it does to impair his levels of hotness. Of course, he’s also holding the most adorable little girl I’ve ever seen. And I can’t even really see her. She’s got her face tucked into the nape of his neck and her auburn curls hang in a wild mess around her head. Maybe it’s the way she’s clinging to him, with such love and trust, that’s got me so smitten with the sight of them.

I almost sigh, melting into the counter behind me. Then, I remember what I said. What he responded. And that he heard me.

“I was talking to Abbas,” I blurt. “About his hot brother. Who happens to be in town, too.”

I can feel every set of eyes move in my direction and land on me. Even the tiny set on Lachlan’s daughter. Which is a hazel brown and has lashes for days. Definitely the most adorable little girl ever.

“I have seven sisters,” Abbas says slowly. “I know Nus is a little on the masculine side, but I still don’t count her as a brother. Plus, she’s in New Jersey. Where she lives. With no plans of moving.”

“Wow.” Mal. I’d like to think she’s responding to the sight of the gorgeous man now standing at our coffee maker, thus adding herself to the pool of humiliation I’m currently soaking in, but I can tell from her tone the ‘wow’ is directed at me. And my poor attempt at covering up my awkwardness. With more awkwardness.

With no way left to save myself, I abort the conversation entirely and move on as though nothing happened. “I hear this little angel likes blueberries.”

Her face lights up. “Boohs-berries.” She grins and I notice her lips are tinted purple from her breakfast.

“I tried to save you some,” he says to Chase, “but she was too fast for me.”

Chase makes a face and sighs. “It’s fine. I’m used to girls stealing all my food.”

“We pay into the grocery fund,” Mal reiterates her former point. “It’s not stealing when you pay for it.”

“So, you two pay him to do the grocery shopping?” Lachlan asks, apparently trying to summarize what he’s learning, “but then he keeps all the groceries over in his kitchen?”

“No,” I answer, before I can think it through and stop myself. “We keep our food here.”

“So, then you are stealing.” He reaches for the half and half smirking.

“I prefer to think of it as sharing,” I inform him.

“Which we also do,” Mal adds. “Or would. If we didn’t eat so much and so fast.” She pats her belly. Which is inexplicably flat given how much that girl likes to snack.

Somehow, this conversation isn't going any better than the last. The only improvement I can see, is that I'm no longer the only one putting my foot in my mouth. This time, Mallory is definitely in the pool of embarrassment with me.

"Anyway," I try one more time. "What's this beauty's name? And how long do we get to enjoy her for?"

Lachlan's brow hooks briefly, like he's contemplating whether or not I have any business asking those questions. I do. He's standing in *my* kitchen now. I can ask whatever I damn well please. And I can do it as loudly as I want while I'm at it.

"This is Monroe," he bounces her ever so slightly, making her giggle. "And we're only in town for a few days. Probably won't even be here by next weekend."

"Probably?" Abbas's forehead wrinkles as both his eyebrows make a hike for his hairline.

"Definitely." Lachlan's eyes move from us to his daughter before he faces the room again. I'm almost certain there was a flash of sadness in them when they landed on her, but it's gone now. Whatever it was. "Plus, we have other people to see while we're here, so we won't even be around much during the days."

"Oh." As soon as I say it, I wish I'd done a better job of hiding my disappointment. "I mean, that's too bad for Chase. Since he hardly gets to see you."

Chase frowns, but he lets it slide. "Yes. That is too bad for me." He reaches past me to put his empty mug into the sink. "Also, if we're going to make it to Mom's in time for brunch, I need to get in the shower." He tickles Monroe's belly as he goes by her, does a backwards wave at the rest of us and then he's walking out, door swinging shut behind him.

"And then there were five," Mal says into her mug before she slurps what's left in there.

"Four." Abbas salutes us with his cup and starts making tracks toward the door as well. "I'm going back to bed. If I'm going to have the apartment to myself today, I'm not going to waste it."

"Carnival Row marathon?" I ask.

"Hell yeah." And then the door closes, and he's gone too.

"Why does he need the place to himself to watch tv?" Lachlan asks. It's a fair question.

"He has this insane surround sound system set up in his bedroom. Can't use it without blasting the entire apartment with whatever he's watching," I explain.

"Oh." He nods, but I get the sense he's resisting the urge to shake his head even as he's bending down to reach his mouth to his cup again.

"That reminds me," Mal says, adding her cup to the growing pile in the sink, "I'm going...somewhere." She waves at Monroe before she spins on the ball of her foot and makes a beeline for her bedroom to finish getting ready.

I catch Lachlan do a double take when she walks away. Apparently, it's the first he's noticing she's not wearing pants. I have to appreciate how quickly he looks in the other direction once he grasps what he's seeing.

"Sound system reaches our apartment too," I mumble, explaining her sudden plans to head for an undetermined destination.

"Got it." He nods. "What about you? You plan to escape as well?"

Small talk. Generally, I'm not a fan. But in his case, I'll make an exception if for no other reason than I'm not ready to stop talking to him. "I do not." Probably a little too small even for small talk. "I have an audition in two days and I still have to rehearse my monologue," I explain. "I'll just wear headphones. It's what I usually do when I'm stuck in the building on an Abbas binge watching day."

“You’re an actress,” he says. I can’t tell if he’s impressed or thinks it’s foolish. His expression isn’t really saying either, but those tend to be the main reactions my profession pulls in from people. They either think it’s awesome I’m pursuing my dreams or naïve to think I’d ever make it in an industry that has a one in a million-success rate. “What’s the audition?”

Genuine curiosity. Unexpected.

“It’s an original play. A retelling of Cinderella, a kind of Cinderella with a twist, told from the Stepmother’s perspective. I’m auditioning for the part of Cinderella. I think it would be cool to play her viewed from that angle.”

He still seems unusually invested. “What’s the twist?”

“You’re familiar with the standard version?”

He glances down at the toddler in his arms, and I notice she’s wearing a nightgown covered in sparkles and tiaras.

I laugh quietly. “Right. Of course, you are.” A girl after my own heart. I might not look it to most, but I’m a sucker for fairy tales filled with princes and princesses. “So, in this version told from the stepmother’s perspective, she obviously doesn’t see herself as the villain. Cinderella is.”

“Ah.” He sounds almost intrigued. “So, you’re not auditioning to be the hero, you want to play the bad guy.”

“Actually, Cinderella isn’t the hero in the traditional tale either. She’s the victim,” I point out.

He tips his head back and forth. “I think that’s a matter of perspective, too.”

I crinkle my brow. “I don’t see how. Sure, she’s her own hero in the sense that she keeps believing in the impossible and remains kind and open-hearted despite the many reasons not to. But, in the end, if it weren’t for the fairy Godmother –“

“Who wouldn’t exist if not for her unwavering belief in the impossible.”

“And the prince –“

“Who wasn’t being seen or heard by those closest to him and was only viewed as his title and what it could offer by those who weren’t, and therefor was in desperate need of genuine kindness and an open heart.”

I stop talking and stare at him. My mouth twists and my nose twitches while my face waits for my next order to speak. “Fine,” I surrender, “maybe it is all about perspective.”

“Everything always is.” His mouth quirks briefly before it disappears in his mug, but I can still see the smirk sparkling in his blue eyes.



LACHLAN

MONROE SQUIRMS IN MY arm, suddenly tired of being held and eager for a little freedom to move. Greer notices before I can decide how to best handle my daughter’s desire to run around and my protective but controlling instincts not to let her in unknown terrain.

“You can let her down,” Greer offers. “I promise there’s nothing here she can break or hurt herself on.”

My eyes narrow while I carefully consider the words I want to say to best voice my concerns and not sound like a total jackass. “You know this how?”

“Because I nanny to pay the bills that acting doesn’t cover.” She leans away from the counter, arm outstretched to gesture at the adjacent living room. “Trust me, this place is probably safer than your

own. Nora had the entire apartment professionally baby proofed before she let me bring any of the kids over.”

“Nora?” I’m only asking because I’m curious. She had me convinced at professional baby proofers. I’m setting Monroe free as we speak.

“My boss.” She bugs her eyes out at me. “The mom.”

“Right.” Somehow, I’m struggling to wrap my brain around this nanny thing. Not that I’m generally surprised to hear she needs to supplement her income. Given her chosen career path, it’s not unusual to be strapped for cash while waiting for the next big gig to fill in the gaps again. I know. My own brother was determined to make a go of it on Broadway. Teaching music was supposed to be temporary. Now he’s head of the department at some fancy private school and hasn’t even been to an audition in years.

Still. Nanny? Greer? Between the vibrant floral design of her full sleeve tattoo running up her left arm and disappearing under the short sleeve of her shirt where it likely continues over her shoulder to meet with more ink, the half-shaved, half-braided styling of her otherwise long black and teal hair, and the septum piercing, she certainly doesn’t remind of any nanny we’ve had back home. And Monroe’s gone through her fair share.

“I take it by the judgy look on your face right now, you wouldn’t hire me,” she muses. Thankfully, not at all as offended as she ought to be.

“Sorry. I’m just...surprised.” It’s not much of a save.

“Uh-huh,” she says dryly, dark brown eyes laughing at me.

Then, before I can try to amend my reaction and come up with something that makes me sound like less of a snob, Mallory comes out of her room again. This time, fully clothed and slinging a giant purse over her shoulder as she moves through. “I’m out. Text me when the binge is over.”

Greer gives her a thumbs-up and grins.

Mallory has one foot out the door when she turns back. “Oh, and I found Cheese in my bed again.”

“Well, that’s what you get for eating oatmeal in your bed at night,” Greer responds, apparently not as thrown by the announcement as I was.

“Listen, I love Cheese, but I’d really prefer my bed was a cheese-free zone when I get back.”

“I’m on it,” Greer promises. “No Cheese for you tonight.”

The door closes, and we’re alone again.

Monroe’s been busy examining a basket of children’s books she found by the coffee table (the nanny thing seems to be for real at least) so I take the time to revisit the topic Mallory only just closed the door on. Literally.

“I’m sorry. Why is there cheese in her bed? And what does it have to do with oatmeal? Does she put cheese in her oatmeal? Like, a savory oatmeal?” I like savory, but that sounds disgusting.

Greer laughs. “She doesn’t eat Cheese. Cheese eats the oatmeal.” Then, without explaining what clearly needs more clarification, she just turns and walks away, heading straight for Mallory’s room. A few seconds later, she reemerges.

She walks all the way back to the breakfast bar, before turning halfway to show me her back and the rodent clawing its way up her shirt to her shoulder. “This is Cheese.”

“That’s a rat.” I try not to physically shudder, having already insulted her plenty for one morning.

“He is indeed.” She turns her head until she’s nose to nose with the thing. It’s white, with a long pink tail and glowing red eyes. “You’re not scared of rats, are you?”

“Of course not.” A little disgusted maybe. But scared? No. “Just confirm that he’s a legit pet and not something that started hanging around because Mallory has a collection of half-eaten oatmeal

bowls covering every surface of her bedroom.”

Her big brown eyes get smaller, and they dart from side to side like she’s a trapped animal searching for a way out.

“Oh, my God.” I start moving for my kid. She’s happily perusing their living room, oblivious to the pest infestation, but I’m fully prepared to snatch her up and get her the hell out of here, even if it does mean not putting her down again until we get to my mother’s and another child-safe household.

Greer giggles behind me. “Calm down, you big drama queen.”

I stop, halfway between her and Monroe, and look back at her over my shoulder. I’m not aborting my mission just yet. “If you have a rat problem here, I’m not letting my kid play on your floor,” I hiss under my breath.

“The only rat problem we have is Cheese sneaking into Mal’s bed at night trying to steal a bite of her oatmeal,” she says grimacing. “Mal likes Cheese just fine, just not as much as she likes her late-night snacks, that she does in fact clean up after. So, the potential stealing of her food *while she’s eating it* is where the real problem lies. Which then, hardly seems like a rat problem anymore and more like a Mal problem.” She pauses to grab the rat with her free hand, the one not holding the coffee cup, and carefully untangles him from her hair where he’s apparently been trying to nest. “Cheese was supposed to be a snake snack and I saved him. So, now we’re buds for life.”

“How is it you can use so many words to explain something and still somehow wind up leaving me with more questions than I had before you opened your mouth?” I ask, still staying near Monroe, but only because she’s bringing me one of the books from the basket now.

“It’s a talent.” Greer shrugs. “I come by it naturally.”

“I’m sure.” I lower myself down to be at eye level with Monroe who’s smiling and jabbering on, pretending to read the storybook to me. “Are you really going to make me ask how you saved the rat’s life from a snake? Here? In the city? Where snakes aren’t exactly slithering across your path at every turn?”

“I mean, I don’t want to just ramble on unless I know there’s real interest in what I have to say,” she teases, coming to join us in the living room where she plops down into the couch a second later. “But since you mentioned it, I was on a date with this guy, or more specifically, I was about to go on a date with this guy. When I got to his place, I was a little early, and he asked if I could wait a few minutes. He had to feed his snake.” She pulls her feet up onto the sofa and tucks them under her. “Well, I like to be accommodating when possible, so of course, I said yes. Until I saw what he was feeding the snake.” She glances down at the white rodent now curled up in her lap. “I screamed, snatched Cheese from his grip and ran out of there.”

“I take it that was the end of your relationship?”

“It was a pretty mutual decision at that point.” She leans into the cushions, grinning. “Alright. Your turn.”

“My turn for what?” I don’t really have any tales of rat rescues to share.

“To talk about yourself.” Her eyes move for Monroe, who handed me the book when she was done with it and took off to find another. “Or anything else you’d like to tell me about.”

“Chase didn’t have a chance to answer all your questions before I showed up, huh?” I ask, getting up to take the last few steps to the couch where I have a seat as well.

“You know, I think he had a chance to answer plenty. But he was being all sorts of cagey about it. Like he wanted to protect your privacy or something.” She rolls her eyes, like privacy is a concept she hardly deems important. Then she smirks and I know she’s well aware how invasive some might

consider her prodding. “The whole thing’s a little shady if you ask me. Surprise secret brother no one knew about. With a baby.”

“I’m sorry, don’t you mean, surprise *hot* secret brother?” I’m not really that ego driven. Mostly I’m just hoping if I make her just slightly uncomfortable, she’ll get flustered and start rambling again, relieving me of having to do any of the talking here.

My efforts fall by the wayside though when she takes my comment in stride. “Actually, that part he explained. Different genetics. One hot brother. One Chase.” Her face turns serious. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Don’t tell me you said what?” my brother comes strolling in, door swinging open just in time for him to hear his name be mentioned. “Never mind, don’t answer now. Tell me on the way. We have to leave, like, five minutes ago, if we want to get there when the cinnamon rolls come out of the oven. And I do,” he clarifies, “want to get there for that.”



CHAPTER THREE

GREER

“So,” Mal prods, “how was hanging out with Chase’s hot secret brother?”

“Lachlan,” I say. I like saying it. I don’t know that I’ve ever encountered a better match between a name and a person before. He’s just so...Lachlan. “And we didn’t really hang out as much as he lingered around waiting for Chase to get ready so they could leave.” At least that’s what I’m telling myself.

“You don’t think it’s a little weird that he would linger around our apartment waiting for Chase and not Chase’s?” Mal tugs at one of many loose strand thoughts I’ve tried to keep tucked away in my brain since this morning.

“Not so weird when our apartment has coffee. And is baby proof.” Those two answers have been running on repeat in my mind every time my crushing girl brain asks that same question. And I am. Crushing. As much as I hate to admit it. Lachlan got to me. Somewhere between dissecting fairy tales and watching his toddler pretend to read to him, he got to me.

“Still a little weird,” Mal insists, making a face at me. “Unless of course he had other reasons for stalling on his departure.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me. That alone, would make her look ridiculous. But she’s also had tomato sauce on her chin and spinach leaves in her hair for the last half hour. The wiggling eyebrows are just taking her over the top now.

“I can’t talk to you while you’re cooking.” I hand her a towel. At the very least, the sauce must go. She’s making her famous vegetarian lasagna and she can’t cook anything without wearing half of it before she’s done. “Also, why are you making two pans?”

She wipes her face more thoroughly than necessary before tossing the towel near the sink. “Because there are two extra people to feed tonight, and we barely have enough for four of us when I only make one pan.”

“You think we’re still having Sunday night dinner together?” We’ve been having family style meals every Sunday for years, taking turns with cooking from week to week. “I just figured it was off since Chase has company.”

Mallory frowns. “Wasn’t off when my mom was visiting two months ago.”

“That was different,” I insist. “We wanted her to make her perogies and Sunday night dinner was the perfect opportunity to convince her to cook.”

“Okay, what about when Abbas’s sisters pass through. We never skip dinner when they’re around. Just add more chairs to the table,” she argues. She’s less committed now. I can tell because she’s back to layering her veggies.

“Also, not the same,” I counter. “They all live within driving distance. It’s not a big deal when they visit. And they always bring side-dishes when they come on Sundays. They know about dinner. They come prepared. They expect to eat.”

She gracefully flings the last slice of zucchini into the second pan then takes another brief break from layering her lasagna to stare at me. “Can we stop arguing about this and start talking about the real issue here?”

Instinctively, I pull away from the counter before I respond, “What’s the real issue?”

Mallory rolls her eyes and reaches for the open box of pasta to continue her work. “You like a boy even though you decided you wouldn’t like a boy until you landed an acting gig that would allow you to quit nannying. And even though you made big announcements about swearing off love and not

focusing on anything but your career for the foreseeable future, now, for the foreseeable future, all you want to focus on is a boy. But you can't admit that. Because of said big announcement."

I purse my lips stubbornly. "That's not the real issue. That's a non-issue. It's not even a thing. Even if I did like a boy, which I'm not saying I do, the foreseeable future allotted to focusing on him would be a total of five or six days. Why would I bother paying any attention at all to a boy who won't even be here longer than a week?"

Mallory shrugs. "Because you're a hopeless romantic who believes in fairy tales to the depths of your being?"

I do have that going against me. I blame my father. He would argue it's one of my most valuable traits, but he's not exactly rooted in reality. Or dating. Regardless, it was that very part of me that became the driving force behind my big announcement about swearing off romance in the first place. "I don't like him," I insist.

"Then why are you trying to cancel family dinner night?"

"I'm not. I was merely suggesting that it might be canceled all on its own." I start to back out of the kitchen. Halfway between the breakfast bar and the sofa, I turn around and start facing where I'm walking again. At least until I'm close enough to plop myself into the couch cushions. "But since it's clearly not, by all means, carry on with your double lasagnas. I'll just be over here. Focusing on my lines. For my audition. You know, for the sake of my career and all."

Thankfully, Abbas chooses this very moment to come barging in through the front door.

"They need you over there," he announces, pointing at me.

Maybe I'm not thankful he's here after all. "Why?"

"Baby emergency." He plugs his ears as he says it.

"A tantrum and screaming fit is not an emergency," I say dryly, assessing the situation from his reaction.

"I beg to differ," he says, his face still pulled into a pained expression. "I also beg for you to come over and make it stop. Apparently, her highness likes her hair a certain way and daddy doesn't know how to do it."

"Her highness, huh?" I roll my eyes at his antics. Growing up in a family of nine left Abbas with little patience for those on the more spoiled end of the childhood spectrum. "What makes you think I'll be able to do her hair the way she likes. I've only ever seen the kid with bedhead."

He marches toward the couch and grabs my wrist, trying to tug me into a standing position. "You're a nanny to four girls and you do all of their hair. I know. We all know. You complain about it all the time. The whining during the brushing. The insane requests for insta-inspired updos. The constant begging to curl or straighten or crimp or tousle. You can do a two-year-old's hair. She probably just wants pigtails or some shit."

I let him drag me out of the comforts of my sofa cushion. "Abbas you know a lot about hair for a dude who keeps his head nearly clean shaven."

"I know the standard amount about hair for a dude with eight sisters," he grumbles. "Please. Come. Put a stop to the insanity." He practically drags me through the living room, only stopping briefly when we pass by the kitchen. "Are you making lasagna for family dinner?"

"Uh-huh." Mal looks up from stirring the cheese sauce.

"You're making extra, right?" Abbas looks worried. "Since Lachlan and Monroe are eating with us? That dude is big. And he can really eat. I know, I've shared many a meal with the God of Thunder lookalike. And I don't want to have to give up my seconds."

Mallory doesn't even answer him, just stares at me. "Told you it was a two-pan dinner night."

"I'm sorry, I don't have time for I told you so's. I have a toddler hair emergency to tend to." I wiggle out of Abbas's grip and hurry from the apartment all on my own. No need to get caught up in another discussion about my reasons for suggesting family dinner might be canceled due to extra family being present on family dinner night which seems to imply all family is welcome in the title.

I'm across the hall and walking into the apartment opposite my own within seconds. Once inside, I just follow the sound of screaming to the back bedroom. It's usually not used for sleeping in, just a pretend office neither Abbas nor Chase really has use for, but I suppose it comes in handy when there's unexpected company.

"Why are we torturing the child?" I demand jokingly as soon as I step into the room and take in the scene before me.

Chase is on his hands and knees picking up more hair ties, bobby pins, mini-clips, plastic barrettes and scrunchies than I've ever seen in my life. I'm guessing there was some sort of hair accessory bag explosion prior to my arrival. Meanwhile, Lachlan is lying flat on his stomach, head under the bed, where I have to assume, based on screaming and his positioning, Monroe has taken to hiding.

"I think we're the ones being tortured here," Chase remarks loudly.

"Everyone out," I announce, shouting to be heard over Monroe's high-pitched wailing. "We need some one-on-one girl talk to sort this mess out."

Chase is all too happy to escape the room, Lachlan however, seems hesitant to retreat from his efforts.

"I can handle this," he says stubbornly, still down on the floor, but no longer lying flat in surrender.

"I'm sure you can." I'm not sure. Actually, the longer I'm in here, and the more I can see the toddler rage unleashed about this room, the more sure I am he can't. But that's not something you ever tell the parent. Nanny 101 right here. "But that doesn't mean you have to. Let me help you. You've had a long weekend and being a single parent is hard. It's okay to let someone else step in and offer you a little break now and again."

He doesn't say anything. Just huffs as he pushes himself up from the floor and to his feet. "I'm going to take three minutes to calm down. Then I'll be right back to take over again."

"Of course." I nod, smiling. In three minutes, I'll be done.

As soon as the door closes behind him, I lower myself to the floor in the center of the room. Crossing my legs to get comfortable, I start perusing the collection of hair accessories surrounding me, commenting on the ones I like, dismissing the ones I don't.

I pay no attention at all to Monroe, who went silent the second her father left and who has started to crawl out from under the bed already. I can see her out of the corner of my eye, even if I'm purposely keeping my attention on the hair ties and barrettes.

Only when she's scooching herself into a seated position beside me, do I start chatting with her. "I like these butterfly ones, do you?"

She nods, taking the small clip from my hand and trying to put it in her own hair.

"Very pretty." I brush a few messy strands out of her tear-streaked face. She's exhausted and I can't help but wonder how screwed up her sleep schedule is from traveling. "Is that how you like your hair? With butterflies?"

She nods, sniffing as she leans forward to pull a few more from the scattered mess that surrounds us. "Butterflies and rose bubs," she mumbles in her toddler jargon. Every kid has their own version of

it, and it always gets easier to understand the more you hear it. Monroe's isn't too jumbled. I should be able to crack it.

"Butterflies and rose buds? Rose buds?"

She nods, clipping another butterfly into her hair. I scan the assortment of clips. There are loads of butterflies. And I see daisies. But no roses.

"Which is your favorite rose?" I ask, hoping she'll help me out by just pointing at what she means, but she just frowns, looking confused.

Then, she takes both hands and holds them on her head, one on each side like a set of Micky Mouse ears. "Rose buds go like dis."

Ah, I think I'm starting to understand now. I smile. "Monroe, will you let me put rose buds and butterflies in your hair?"

She nods slowly, fingers grabbing at another butterfly which she picks up and hands to me.

"Perfect choice." I stretch out my arm to reach the brush lying abandoned on the desk chair. "Why don't you come have a seat right here," I say, patting at my lap for her to come sit. Monroe picks two more butterflies off the floor and then wobbles her little body over, dropping her weight in a plop right where my ankles connect, making a sturdy pad for her little tush to land on. With the hair mystery solved, I get to work, quickly forming her soft waves of silky red hair into tiny bulbs on the top of her head. She doesn't have enough of it to do much else, but I can easily see how this do has been compared to butterflies and rose buds.

I'm just placing the last little hair clip among the others, creating a sort of butterfly crown with them, when the door opens, and Lachlan cautiously peeks inside. "It's very quiet in here," he observes, scanning the room until his eyes stick on us, still camped out on the floor. Monroe is still comfortably hanging out in my lap, busying herself with collecting rubber bands from the floor and slipping them on her wrists like bracelets.

As soon as he sees her finished hairdo, a surge of recollection moves through his expression. "Of course, that's what she wanted." He shakes his head and I see his mouth tighten in frustration, probably at his own shortcomings. "I should have known."

"Who usually does her hair?" I ask, skipping past the self-loathing and moving on to small talk. Also, I'm curious. Since they showed up here, we've heard little about him, less about Monroe and nothing at all about her mother. But I get the sense that's been intentional, so coming right out with all my nosy questions seems a poor choice for actually getting them answered.

"Depends," he says, scratching his chin and looking away. "I live with my father's family back home. They're old school, keep a large staff employed to run the household, including nannies, so there's always help." He delivers this information casually, like it's the sort of thing he wants to be perceived as totally normal even when we both know it's totally not.

"So that's common practice then in Linden?" I smirk. I don't really expect him to answer. "What about her mother?" The door's wide open with awkwardness. I might as well walk on through and make it worse.

"Um." His eyes go from moving around the room to seeking out the floor. "She died. About seven months ago."

"Oh." I made it so much worse than just awkward. "I'm sorry." Obviously, there was a reason no one had mentioned her before now. Why didn't I ever think for one moment this was it? "I shouldn't have asked."

"You couldn't have known." For the first time in a while, his eyes pause to meet mine.

"I could have," I tell him quietly. "My mother left when I was four. We never talk about her either."

He lowers himself to the ground, having a seat across from us. Monroe promptly scurries from my lap and into his, giggling as she practically body slams herself into place at his core, where she fits perfectly. Instantly, her face lights up, eyes gazing adoringly at him as she nestles in tightly and he wraps an arm around her, ever the protective father. It suits him. Fatherhood. I see a lot of dads at the playground and school and the kids' various activities. As much as you think they ought to, not all men come by the nurturing naturally.

"Was it hard?" he asks, voice low as if he's trying to keep our conversation from piquing his daughter's interest. "Growing up without a mother?"

I study his face for a moment before I answer. It's changing. Becoming more real the longer he's here, the more depth we seek in our conversations. I thought he was pretty before, now, I'm starting to see a completely different kind of beauty in him, and it has nothing at all to do with his handsome features or his striking blue eyes, and so much more with the emotions surfacing in them. Even if the concern in his eyes isn't for me, I know the compassion is.

"My father made it easy," I say at last. "He made our family feel complete every second of every day and I don't even know how he did it. But he did."

"What about the milestones," he goes on. "The moments in a young girl's life she looks to her mother to guide her through?"

I can't tell if he's more scared of having to explain periods or hear about his daughter's first big crush, but either way, I do my best to set his mind at ease. "Truth is, I didn't have any expectation of having my mother guide me through anything. So, I always looked to my father for guidance. And he always provided it. He was open and honest and most all, I never felt weird or uncomfortable going to him with my questions because he was never weird or uncomfortable answering them." I can recall several friends growing up, who were less fortunate with their mothers. "It also helped that my father owns a bookshop," I add. "Most conversations were followed up with reading material." I grin. It sounds tedious, but it was wonderful.

"Your father sounds like a remarkable man," Lachlan says, leaning down to gently kiss the top of Monroe's head. When he looks at me again, the corner of his mouth is hitched up, creating a lopsided grin so delightfully adorable it makes my stomach flip-flop. "Maybe you could give me his number? In case of emergencies?" he jokes. I think.

"I probably ought to," I tell him, casting a wary eye around the room which still looks like a storm ripped through it. "You seem prone to those."

He laughs quietly. "You have no idea."



LACHLAN

EVERY TIME I COME HOME to the states, I remember how much I miss family meals. We still sit together to eat with my father's family, but it's formal and conversation is almost always centered around business. Over the years, I've taken to eating alone in my study in the evenings, and most recently, with Monroe, meals have been spent with the staff in the kitchen. My stepmother deems her too messy and loud to sit at the dining table, so we've been banished for now. It's been a blessing to be honest. I don't miss meals with them at all. I do, however, miss this.

“Hey, Abbas, hit me with that parm while you’re at it,” Chase says, pointing at his pile of pasta as he holds his plate out over the table, clearly hoping his friend will grate a hefty portion of cheese on top of it once he’s done with his own.

Abbas obliges, sprinkling shredded parmesan all over when he does. Abomination number one were we seated at my stepmother’s table. Number two would be Greer and Mallory reaching over each other to assemble their plates with salad and bread and olive oils for dipping. Three, undoubtedly, would be Monroe, eating lasagna with her fingers and casually dropping a handful to the floor every few bites, which Greer has told me repeatedly not to worry about until after dinner. And four is so outrageous, even I’m struggling to wrap my brain around it. It’s Cheese. Hopping and running through the maze of dishes on the table, stealing dropped pieces of food before scurrying to the centerpiece, a giant vase filled with an assembly of flowers, and hiding under the overflow of leaves and blossoms to eat in peace.

“Mo needs more sauce,” Greer says straight-faced as she points at my kid sitting across the table from her. “I can tell because she’s wearing all the sauce we put on her plate on her face now.”

I turn to see what Greer’s talking about. As soon as I see the newest disaster Monroe has created, I start to apologize. “I’m sorry, I really shouldn’t have given her something so messy to eat on her own,” I grumble, reaching for my napkin and hurrying to clean up what I can.

“Dude, calm down,” Chase mutters from my right. “No one here gives a shit. She’s not even two. Everyone at this table knew she was going to find more places to put her dinner than just her mouth.” He points his fork at the surrounding room. “Which is why we’re eating at the girls’ place. No carpets, plus plastic cups. Because Greer spills and Mallory breaks stuff.”

“And now we have Mo, who offers free face painting with marinara.” Greer smirks. “I hope you’ve bought the girl some finger paints back home, I think she’s got a future in the arts.”

Finger painting. Not under my stepmother’s roof. But maybe soon. I glance at Monroe again, still happily playing with her food, swishing her fingers across the tray of her highchair and making designs with the red sauce while stuffing chunks of pasta and veggies into her mouth with her other hand. She’s perfectly content. At ease. Comfortable in her own skin like I haven’t seen her in a while. Haven’t felt for myself either.

Just another reason I know what I’m here to do needs to be done. So she can have this, a proper carefree childhood, all the time.

“No painting yet,” I say out loud. “Not with anything other than food at least.”

Abbas chuckles. “She did a pretty good job with Chase’s hair wax in the bathroom too.”

“What?” Impossible. She hasn’t been left alone once since we’ve been here. “When?”

“When Chase was watching her while you were out in the hall on that phone call,” Abbas explains.

Meanwhile, I notice my brother is taking faster, larger bites. Presumably to render him incapable of talking.

“You’re a teacher,” I point out the obvious. “People entrust you with their children every day of the week for hours at a time and you couldn’t get through fifteen minutes with one child without incident?”

He gulps down his food, his defenses apparently triggered enough to garner an interest in speaking again. “I teach high school. Teenagers don’t paint on the bathroom walls with hair wax.”

“It’s true,” Greer chimes in. “They use lipstick and sharpies.”

Chase gapes at her. “That didn’t help.”

“Oh, was I supposed to help?” She shrugs. “I didn’t realize. I was just contributing to the conversation. No sides. Just Switzerland. With experience.”

“But I’m glad someone brought up that phone call,” Mallory adds, taking things in a new direction. “I’ve been waiting for someone to mention it so I could ask about it.” She rips off a bite-size piece of bread and swipes it through her mix of olive oil and herbs. “Who is Triston Wallace and why are you trying to find him?”

Chase stops chewing. I can see him from the corner of my eye. His mouth is still full, but his jaw froze the second he heard the name.

Abbas is moving slower. Gradually placing his fork down into his plate, uncomfortably folding his hands in his lap. Me? I’m still eating. Forging on as if I didn’t hear anything.

Until I can’t pretend anymore because the silence is too loud and too awkward around me.

“Why am I getting the feeling I stumbled on some sort of forbidden secret here?” Mallory says, probably trying to backpedal her way out of having brought it up. “Half the table seems to already know about it, so it’s obviously not vault worthy.” She picks up her bread again. “You know what, forget I asked. It’s clearly forbidden even if it isn’t secret.” She giggles at her own joke, but I know she’s just trying to make light of the situation. She has no idea the topic she accidentally opened up for discussion with her curiosity. Family dinner just lost some of its lighthearted appeal.

“Triston Wallace is Monroe’s biological father,” I explain flatly. “I’m looking for him because it’s time his daughter was returned to him.” I put my fork down and push my plate in. I’ve lost my appetite.



CHAPTER FOUR

GREER
Despite everyone's best efforts, dinner didn't recover after Mallory inadvertently poked the surprise baby daddy hornets' nest. The worst part was, Mal and I now had a million new questions both of us were too afraid to ask. Which left us to come up with our own theories all through dishes and after dinner clean-up. It wasn't pretty. Between the scientist and the girl who grew up in a bookstore, we came up with stories even beyond our own wildest imaginations. And I don't think any of them were even remotely likely to be true.

Still, it satisfied the need to know enough to call it a night and hope for more rational answers come morning.

Now that I'm standing here, hovering over the coffee maker waiting for it to provide an entire cup of wake-up elixir, I'm not nearly as confident we'll end today knowing any more than we did yesterday.

Our kitchen is noticeably quiet for a Monday morning. Especially quiet when one considers the coffee maker in the apartment across the hall has been out of commission for the last three weeks. The deli downstairs may serve coffee, but it's only worth the investment if you're looking for something warm to hold on a cold morning to keep your fingers from freezing off. And we're only into September. We're not deli coffee cold yet.

"This can't be good," Mal observes, coming out of the bathroom, blonde hair still wet and wrapped in a towel. "You're the only one ahead of me in line for the coffee? I'm usually last. Well, first when you consider I wind up standing here waiting for the second pot to brew."

"They're hiding," I mumble, deciding it's close enough to first cup full and pouring myself one.

"That much is clear." Mallory pulls herself up onto the counter across from me, feet lightly kicking at the cupboard doors once she's seated. "But are they hiding because they're afraid of our questions? Or because they're embarrassed about how awkward last night ended?"

I shrug having a sip. "Maybe they think we're embarrassed about last night."

"Why would we be embarrassed?" Mal makes a face, like she thinks the concept is ridiculous. "Are we walking around with babies who call us mama but whose mamas we are not? No. And we're also not walking around with babies who call us mama but whose mamas we are not without telling people we aren't the mamas and that there are in fact, other mamas we're here to find so that the babies who call us mama but whose mamas we are not, can go back to their mamas. Who we are not."

"Wow."

"I know. I had a hard time following that myself, but I think I got it right."

"They might think that part's less embarrassing than the part where you were super nosy and asked about the baby daddy you didn't know was the baby daddy when you asked," I point out.

"No." She shakes her head. "That's not embarrassing. I'm a scientist. Asking questions is what I do. It's my whole thing. Questions. It's how I get the answers. It's how I do the science thing. It all starts with questions. Questions are never embarrassing. Answers, those can be a different story."

I know she feels this way. And most days, I love that she feels this way. Because I'm super nosy and having a scientist for a best friend and roommate has put me in a position to be present for some seriously intrusive questions to be asked and answered which I never would have had the balls to ask myself but which she happily brings up all under the guise of her 'science is based on questions'

motto. But, never once, haven't I known that the questions she's asking are intrusive and that we're really just being nosy about things that aren't any of our business.

"Mal," I start slowly, taking into account that she's still waiting on her first jolt of caffeine for the day, "I think maybe the science thing is new to Lachlan. And I also think he's super private. So, you know, as proper hostesses, we might need to go apologize."

She mulls it over. "Fine. For sake of maintaining our status as proper hostesses, I'll go apologize." She eyes the coffee maker. "After I'm granted a cup by the morning gods."

"Of course."

Three minutes later, we're storming the landing and barging into the apartment on the other end of it.

"We're here to say sorry," Mallory announces as the door swings open. "But it's mostly out of courtesy and not at all because we did anything wrong."

"Pretty hollow apology," Abbas grumbles from the kitchen table where he's eating what looks like soggy cereal. "I notice you didn't bring any coffee outside of your own mugs."

"Also, why are you apologizing?" Chase asks from the counter, poised to catch the slices of bread set to be catapulted from their toaster any second. "Other than for the not bringing us coffee part?"

Mallory rolls her eyes and sighs. "My science side was a little rude, apparently."

"By your science side, do you mean your super invasive questioning regarding my personal business and private phone call you were eavesdropping on?" Lachlan asks, smirking while he strolls out from the hallway leading to the bedrooms. He's holding Monroe in his arms, her hair done in her favorite butterflies and rosebuds style. I think something inside me just melted a little.

"I was not eavesdropping, everyone in the building knows sound travels through the vents and nothing spoken in halls or stairwells is spoken in secret." She pulls out a chair from the table and has a seat like she's making a statement. I have no idea what that statement is meant to be, but there's way too much flair to the gesture to be simply for the sake of sitting down.

"She's not wrong," Chase admits. "I know every time Derek in 3d gets suspended or fails a class or gets detention, but his parents sure don't because Clare in 3f always steps out into the hall and takes the call, pretending to be his mom."

Abbas nods. "Sally upstairs is pregnant. Hasn't told Jansen yet."

"Probably because it's Micah's baby. Did you hear them doing it in the stairwell two nights ago?" I add, moving in closer to the table to get a better look at the breakfast spread they put out. It's not much. Some scrambled eggs. A few pieces of toast. I decide to pass. I notice too late that Lachlan has moved in beside me and I nearly step on him when I back up from the table again. "Sorry," I stammer when I realize the thing I reached out and held onto to catch myself is his chest. Which is solid and defined in a way I can feel even through his blue button up shirt.

"No worries." He smiles and I can't help but notice the way the color of his shirt makes his eyes pop even more.

"Anyway," Mallory says loudly, bringing the attention back to her. "Are we all clear that I apologized even though I did nothing wrong, and our proper hostess status remains intact?"

"Yes," Chase answers for everyone. I assume. He's usually the representative when there's a group present. "Are we also clear that no one was expecting an apology?"

Mal shoots me an angry glare and I throw my hands up in lieu of a defense.

"Then why didn't anyone come for coffee this morning?" I ask, tackling the only mystery currently within reach of being solved.

"Because you said you would bring it over here," Abbas says.

“Since I offered to make breakfast,” Chase adds.

Mal and I exchange a glance. “Yeah, that might have been said,” she admits after an awkward moment of silence during which we both quietly acknowledge how disturbingly far from reality our speculations of Lachlan’s secret baby daddy took us last night, rendering us unable to recall actual conversations by the time we were done.

“I’ll go get the pot.” I’m already hurrying for the door and the clear path to redemption.

Only once I’m back in my apartment do I realize I didn’t come here alone.

“Do you have a sec?” Lachlan says, closing the door behind him.

“Do you know you’re not holding a baby?” I ask, wondering how I missed so much in so little time. I only just turned my back on him three seconds ago to come over here.

“I handed her to Chase on my way out.” He grins. I’m starting to hate when he does that.

“Then sure.” I turn my back on him again to focus on the coffee. We keep a spare pot to brew a backup for days like today. “I have a sec.”

“I was wondering if I could hire you.”

I turn back around. I was mid dumping grounds into the filter when he caught me off guard with his request and I’m pretty sure I dusted half the countertop with brown specs of heaven by accident when I spun back around. “Hire me?”

“As a nanny,” he explains. “Just for a few hours sometime this week?”

“Have a hot date while you’re in town?” That doesn’t even make sense. I have no idea why I said that other than I’m currently too scared to ask real questions, given mine and Mal’s track record with them and Lachlan’s personal life in the last twenty-four hours.

“Don’t know about hot. But I have that meeting with Triston. And I’d rather have my first face to face with him without Monroe there.”

I nod, gesturing I understand. “Have you met him before?”

“No. Didn’t even know he was the dad until a few weeks ago.” He shakes his head and I get the sense this is so much messier and more complicated than he’s letting on. “I have to meet with our caseworker first. I’m doing that today. After that, I need to set up something with Triston.” He tilts his head, blue eyes looking at me with hope. “Do you think you could fit us in? I know you have a full schedule with your day job and the audition, but –“

“It’s not a problem,” I say before he can go on. And before I can think of the reasons it probably is a problem. “Just tell me when you need me, and I’ll watch Mo for you.”

He sighs with relief, smiling again. “Thank you so much. I was going to ask my mother next, but she’s completely against this whole thing, I’m not sure she’d agree to do anything to help me do it.”

I narrow my eyes, squinting at him suspiciously. “Should I not be supporting this either?” When I realize I can’t hold his stare, I turn back to finish making the second pot of coffee. “I don’t want to pry. And I won’t. But is there some part of this story that doesn’t play out in Mo’s best interest?”

The silence which follows is every bit the answer I was hoping not to get.



LACHLAN

“SO, I CHECKED HIM OUT,” McKenna says, sifting through a large file depicting Monroe’s life from conception to this very moment. “He’s no prince, but he’s never been arrested either.”

“Never been arrested?” I scratch my forehead. This meeting is already going badly. “That’s the best thing you can say about him?”

She drops the file onto her desk and stares at me. “You had your guys investigate him. Why do you care what I have to say?”

I sit up a little taller. I left Monroe in the play area but sometimes I still catch myself moving like she’s with me. Like now, sitting here, slightly hunched because she likes to nestle into me like I’m a human cave. “I care because this is your job. Deciding who’s fit to be a parent and who’s not. My guys aren’t looking for the same thing you are.”

She slips backwards into her chair and I can’t help but feel there’s something somehow deflated about the way she’s sitting here. “Honestly? He checks out. On paper he’s a perfectly suitable candidate. No red flags, no reason a judge would deny him his parental rights.” She pauses, picking up a pen and twirling it between her fingers, stalling.

“But?”

“But my gut tells me something’s off with this dude.”

I snort. McKenna’s two years younger than I am with all the passion of a newly crowned social worker and none of the professionalism of a seasoned veteran. Some days, it’s hard to take her seriously. “That’s your professional assessment then? Something is off with this dude?”

She scoffs, pulling herself into a more regal position again. “No. My professional assessment is he checks out. He’s a perfectly suitable candidate for fatherhood based on the standards of the department of children and families. I already told you that. You wanted more. You wanted my opinion.” She deflates again. “Listen Lachlan, I get that this is a really shitty spot to be in, and I also get you’re looking for me to make it easier. So, if what you want to hear is, yes, he’s a responsible choice which will allow you to hand over your daughter and move forward without guilt or worry, then sure, I can say that. I have the documentation to back it up.”

“I really prefer when these meetings with you are long distance via video chat,” I grumble, trying to stave off the thoughts she’s triggered with her little speech just a moment more.

“I know you mute me on those, by the way,” she says dryly. “I can tell when you keep smiling and nodding even while I’m insulting you. Which I do a lot once I realize I’m muted.”

“I’m aware. Sometimes I catch the tail end of your insults when I turn the sound back on.” I never mind though. She’s one of the rare people who will actually tell me what she thinks of me, it’s refreshing even when it’s offensive. “Fine. Let’s hold off on any next steps until after I meet with him myself.”

“Good.” Her mouth turns thin. “Because you’re running out of steps you can undo the farther into this we get. Once his parental rights are legally recognized, no judge in their right mind will undo it and gift them back to you just because you change your mind. Once it’s done, it’s done. Your time as her father will be over. Monroe won’t be your daughter anymore.”

She’s been doing this a lot. Ever since I first told her what I was considering. She just keeps saying the same thing over and over while using different words to say it every time. Like maybe she doesn’t think I understand it yet. Like she’s still searching for the right way to get the message across to me. It’s unnecessary. I understood the tragic depths of my decision long before I even called her.

“I get it,” I assure her for what feels like the hundredth time. “Now can you stop talking to me like I’m your friend and go back to treating me like you’re my caseworker?”

She makes a face. “You are my friend. Just not one I like very much. And I have to tell you, my caseworker self is even less impressed with you right now.”

“Yeah,” I gathered as much, “but she’ll still be polite about it.”

McKenna responds by yanking a paper from the file and thrusting it at me with a huff. “Here. You’ll need this when you go see him.”

“What is it?” I don’t even look at it. At the present, my brain is in no state to comprehend the things it reads.

“It’s the checklist I use when I inspect a home and meet with parents. It’s not going to tell you the important stuff, but it’ll organize your mind enough to quiet the crazy thoughts and let the worthwhile ones surface. Just trust me.” She nods at the paper still hanging limp in my outstretched hand. “Use the list.”

I nod, finally retracting my hand. I fold the list twice to make it pocketsize and shove it in my pocket.

“Is that it?” I ask. It feels like we’re done, but I’ve been wrong with McKenna before.

“It is.” She spins in her chair until she’s facing her computer screen instead of me. “Make a run for it while you can. Any second I’m going to reboot and give you another speech about how you’re about to screw up everything that matters most to you.”

I rap my knuckles over her desk as I get to my feet. It’s the only goodbye I can manage before I make my escape out of there and head back to the play area and Monroe. Despite what McKenna thinks, the only reason I’m doing any of this is to keep from screwing up everything that matters most to me.

After we leave the department of children and families, I take Monroe to a coffee shop we passed on the way here to grab a snack for her and an exceptionally large, extraordinarily strong coffee for me.

When we step back out onto the sidewalk a few minutes later, her with a giant sugar cookie in hand and me sipping my java, the sun is bright, the sky is blue, and the air is a perfect September crisp.

“We should go to the park,” I tell Monroe. “You wanna go play on the swing?”

Her face lights up at the mention of them. They’re her favorite. She can spend hours in those little seats being pushed to swing to and fro, feet dangling and giggling every time her tummy flips on the descent.

With my kid resting on my hip, I carefully transfer my coffee to the hand attached to the arm holding her securely in place, so I can use the other for the more involved task of making a phone call.

“You know I’m at work, right?” my brother answers.

“Apparently you don’t follow your own no phone rule in the classroom though,” I counter.

“There’s some assembly thing happening in the auditorium, surprise visit from some speaker here to educate everyone on bullying. Not really a surprise though, mostly just insanely overdue. You should see the shit kids put each other through these days. It’s insane. Total torture for the sake of entertainment. Thankfully, drama class doesn’t attract the cretins, mostly just the kids they like to terrorize.”

My brother was one of those kids once. I think it’s the biggest reason him turning to teaching made sense to me when it seemed completely out of the blue to everyone else. I was there with him. I saw. Did what I could to protect him. Until I turned eighteen and was forced to leave. He had two years of high school left to finish on his own. And even though he never said it outright, I could always tell in his voice on our calls, it wasn’t pretty.

“Speaking of kids,” I make my segue to why I’m calling, “where can I find a nice, clean, safe, toddler friendly, playground around here?”

“How would I know?” Chase sounds perplexed.

“You work with kids all day long,” I point out what I thought was an obvious connection.

“My kids don’t hang on the slides and teeter-totters for fun anymore. Any playground that attracts them has some sort of fort or playhouse suitable for smoking, drinking and canoodling in without being seen.” I can hear a stack of papers hit his desk. “Still want me to tell you about the parks I know?”

“Nope.” I take a breath and try to regroup, even as I’m walking through a crowd of people to get across the street along with the rest of the trampling herd. “I’ll just Google it, I guess.”

“Greer it,” he says instead. “Forget Google. You want real, reliable recommendations, call the nanny.”

I was making a very intentional effort not to call her, but now that the obvious answer is out there, spoken aloud, it’ll be hard to explain to my brother why I didn’t want to call her.

“The nanny. Of course,” I mumble. “Good thinking, thanks.”

“It’s not really that excellent of a thinking effort, Lachlan,” he says dryly, and I’m pretty sure he’s about to call me out. “In fact, it’s so not excellent, or even good, or even average, I have to conclude you already had this very thought about calling Greer and then chose not to.”

“Or maybe I’m just too stressed out with everything going on right now to have even basic good thoughts,” I counter. “Why wouldn’t I want to call Greer?” As soon as I pose the question, I know it’s a mistake. Chase will be more than happy to answer it.

“Generally speaking, no one should ever want to call Greer,” he says, surprising me a bit with his angle on things. “She hates answering but has to, given she’s always waiting on some callback or another, only most of the time, all she gets when she picks up is some spammer or telemarketer. So, at some point, she decided to make a game of things. If she had to answer every call that came in, she wasn’t going to be the only one being tortured. Only now we’re all being tortured because you never get Greer when you call, you get some crazy improv character she’s cooking up on the spot to fuck with you, the levels of fuckery, of course, depending on the purpose of initial contact. I should warn you, the only ones who fare well here, are those calling to offer her a part in something.”

I blink, crinkling my forehead, not even sure I’ve understood everything he’s trying to explain to me, but I decide it’s irrelevant. “We exchanged numbers this morning, I watched her put my contact info in her phone,” I explain like this makes all his theories about Greer’s bizarre phone etiquette beside the point.

“So? I mean, I find this of interest, because now I want to know why you exchanged numbers, but other than that, it will have no bearing on your looming fate on the phone and the minutes of your life you’ll never recover once she answers. She doesn’t check caller id before she picks up.”

“Kind of feel like I’m losing minutes right now,” I mutter dryly.

“You’re right. And you’re not alone. I have maybe ten minutes of quiet left before the hordes return ready to discuss what they learned from the speaker, or rather what they could have taught said speaker. There will be mockery and outrage and possibly tears, from me, if I don’t make it to the teacher’s lounge and back in time with the leftover lasagna I brought for lunch and still haven’t eaten,” he huffs, like he’s suddenly moving very quickly. “Call Greer. Hell, you may even find her weird monologues entertaining. You certainly find her intriguing enough so far, exchanging numbers and all.”

“Goodbye, Chase.”

“You can politely shut me out all you like. I’m just going to bring it up again when you can’t hang up on me.”

“Bring up whatever you like, but I can’t tell you something that isn’t there to talk about.”

He chuckles, like he doesn’t believe me. “Good point. I’ll just talk to Greer.”

“Wait.” I’m pretty sure having him dissect her interpretations of things will only make matters worse. Mostly because I’ll want to know what she said.

“Peace out, brother.” The line goes dead before I can persuade him to keep things between us.

“Later, Chase,” I say under my breath, even if he’s no longer present to hear it. Then, I turn my attention to Monroe. “One more call,” I promise, “then no more phones. You have my word.”



CHAPTER FIVE

GREER
I'm spotting Aidan on the monkey bars for the seventh time when I can hear my phone buzzing in my ear. I kind of hate always being hooked into my phone with the earpiece, but it's either this or a lot of potentially important missed calls because my day is filled with moments of four-year-olds dangling several feet in the air and I have to have my hands free to catch them at any given second.

"It's about time you answered," I say in my most dramatic British accent, voice pitching an octave higher as soon as the buzzing stops. "I've been trying to ring you for hours. Mum's gone mad with worry ever since you said you were going to track that bear and get your honey back."

Silence. Not uncommon after I answer the phone.

Then, "Greer?"

"It's possible," I carry on in my accent and unnaturally shrill tone. "But then anything is, isn't it? It's the probability factor one needs to consider in these situations. Tell me, have you caught the bear?"

"I think maybe the bear caught me," the voice says playing along. I'm instantly intrigued. I'm not sure it's ever happened before. "But I don't mind because we're sharing the honey. And he's letting Monroe ride on his back which she's quite fond of."

"Lachlan?"

"It's possible," he says, throwing my own crazy back at me, "it's the probability factor you have to consider in these situations."

"Probability factor's pretty high, I'd say. You're the only one I know who has a Mo." I laugh. "Wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon. Do you already have a meeting set up with Triston?" The words are barely past my lips when Aiden decides to release his grip on the bars and freefall into the unknown. Which thankfully, winds up being my arms. "We need to work on our trust issues, buddy," I tell him scornfully. "You have too much. You need to scale it back a bit." I tickle his sides as I'm setting him safely on the ground, and he giggles taking off as soon as his feet hit the rubber surfacing.

"That's not the sort of thing a guy wants to hear when talking to someone he's considering handing his child over to, Greer," Lachlan's voice rumbles in my ear as I'm breaking into a jog to catch up with Aiden who's making a beeline for the slides now. Meanwhile, Liz, who's securely strapped to my back, is squealing with delight as she bobs away to the faster rhythm of my footsteps.

"I wasn't talking to you," I explain, slowing down at the slides and making my way to the end of the one Aiden is about to come down. "I'm at the playground with two of my kids, one of which likes to launch himself off of high places without warning."

"Oh," he sounds only slightly less confused than he did when I threw him the accent and the bear. Then there's a shift in his tone. "Wait, you're at a playground? Any chance it's close to Birch and Orange?"

I pause at this unexpected turn in the conversation. "Yeah. It's like one block north of there. Why?"

"I assume this meets your anal boss's standards?" he answers my question with another question. I hate that.

"It does. Am I about to see you and Mo stroll up here or what?"

"Would that be alright?"

My first thought comes flying out of my mouth. “Of course! That would be great.” Then my second thought begins to question the first thought’s enthusiasm. My third thought is wrapped up in contemplation of my current smile. Which is big. And goofy. And undeniably triggered by the realization that I’m about to see Lachlan. And Monroe. Mo is pretty damn cute. This smile could be all about her. It’s not, of course, but thoughts five and six are seriously considering working this angle to appease thought three.

“I guess we’ll see you in a few then,” Lachlan says, reminding me that he’s been on the line the whole time my thoughts have been running amok. Hopefully in silence.

“We’ll keep an eye out for you,” I tell him, sounding a little too chipper by my usual standards, but I console myself with the knowledge that Lachlan hasn’t been around long enough to know what those are.

A click in my ear suggests the call has come to an end. “Lachlan?” I ask, just to be sure. There’s no response. From Lachlan anyway. My internal dialogue is picking up speed again.

Until Aiden bounds past me in a mad dash for the swing set. Nothing like a four-year-old running wild at the park to help you zero in on what matters and drop all the noise in an instant.

A few minutes later, I’ve got Aiden and Liz secured side by side in their swings and myself placed directly between them, comfortably able to push each of them at the same time.

Every outing to the park eventually leads to this moment, and I look forward to it every time. Both kids safe, within reach and giggling nonstop. It’s every nanny’s happy place. At least while working. When I’m off the clock, my happy place looks nothing like this. Well, I suppose it could if I were the one sitting in the swing. I don’t care how grown up I get, I still love the sensation of kicking up and flying high before falling back until the momentum catches you and throws you forward all over again.

“There you are,” Lachlan’s voice catches me off guard from behind. “For a moment there, I didn’t recognize you.”

“Did my human accessories throw you?” I tease, looking over my shoulder to watch him walk up to the swing set, Mo sitting on his side, wrapped in his arm. Judging by the way her little arms are stretched long in front of her, little hands clasping at the air, she’s just as fond of the swings as the rest of us.

“Actually, it was the hat,” he says, pointing at the large cream-colored beanie I’ve got loosely draped over my head and hanging down over the back of my hair almost like a hood.

“Right.” Truth be told, I forgot I was wearing it. This time of year, it’s as natural a grab as my wallet and keys on the way out the door.

I wait until he’s officially reached my side before I properly greet Mo and begin my introductions. “Hi, beautiful.” I wave my super excited wave reserved exclusively for humans under the age of seven. Once they hit school age, they just don’t appreciate it the same way anymore. Then I turn sideways to include Aiden and Liz. “You guys, this is my new friend Monroe and her daddy, Lachlan. Monroe and Lachlan, meet my buddies Aiden and Liz.” I gently place my palm over each of their heads as I say their names.

“Hi, Monroe,” Aiden says, waving from his swing. “And Monroe’s daddy.”

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Lachlan returns the greeting, taking things to a new level of flair by bowing as he says it. “And thank you so much for welcoming us to the playground.”

“Absolutely.” I grin. Annoyingly. “We even saved you guys a swing.” I tug at the chain, indicating the empty seat beside Liz.

“Perfect.” He smiles, placing a wiggly Mo inside. “Swings are our favorite.”

“Ours too.” My grin morphs into something else. Something worse. A smile. A very, extremely, smitten smile.

For a while, we just stand here, gently pushing the kids, watching them swing back and forth. It doesn’t take long before Lachlan puts himself in the middle between Mo and Liz and takes over my double duty efforts.

“You could probably use a little break,” he says quietly.

I nod, appreciating the gesture. I’ve been swinging two kids at the same time for so long, I don’t remember what it’s like to focus on just one. It’s nice, having a little help, and I can’t help but think of Nora. She makes me crazy sometimes with her controlling and overly cautious rules, but she’s also one of the strongest women I know. Five kids all on her own. Sure, she’s got me to fill in the gaps, but those only happen when she’s not there. I’m not filling in for a second parent. I’m filling in for the only one.

“So, how did your appointment go?” I ask, before my thoughts about single parents can circle back around to Lachlan.

His expression alone answers my question.

“That great, huh?” I say dryly.

He exhales loudly as if to release any thoughts that might be clouding his judgement. Then he starts talking. “It wasn’t bad. I mean, it was annoying because McKenna makes me crazy, but overall, I guess I don’t really have anything to complain about. Everything is still on track to move forward as planned.”

“McKenna?” I ask, hoping my curiosity sounds casual and not as intense as it suddenly feels.

“She’s our caseworker,” he explains. “She’s younger than me, hence her knack for making me crazy, but she’s been in this with me from the very beginning. Well, before, if you count the months she was Riley’s caseworker before she was mine.”

“Riley?” This time my curiosity really is just for sake of following along. He can’t just keep sprinkling names into the story and not explain who these people are.

“Monroe’s mother.” His eyes, which have been moving back and forth between the kids and me, stay locked on his daughter now.

“Oh.” My curiosity is peaking at an all-time high but I’m not sure it would be even remotely appropriate to keep asking questions.

He must sense that I have them though. Or maybe it’s just a logical conclusion anyone in his situation would come to. Either way, he goes on all on his own, voice low, but clear. “Riley’s older brother Jack was my best friend growing up. We kind of bonded early on, both of us having been told that we had these grand destinies to follow in our father’s footsteps.” He smiles slightly. It’s sweet, laced with sadness and pride. “Jack’s father was a cop. Same as his father before him. And his before that. Uncles, aunts, grandparents. A whole family of blue bloods.” He smirks, as though he’s made an inside joke, only I’m not in on it. “It was a novel idea when we were young, but one which amounted to a lot of pressure the older we got. Even more for him than me, because he had Riley to consider in everything.”

He stops for a moment and I’m tempted to break the silence with another question. I have one. I have several. But the story isn’t over, and so, I muster the patience to keep my mouth shut while he formulates his next thoughts.

“Their parents died when they were nine and seven. Car accident. I remember, it was horrible. Drunk driver going the wrong way on the interstate with no headlights. Highspeed head on collision

they never saw coming. Took out their car, the driver, a semi and two others. Semi's engine caught fire and blew up. No one lived."

My eyes automatically drift to Aidan, the only one here old enough to make sense of what Lachlan is saying, but he's too distracted by a dragonfly that keeps buzzing around him to tune in. Of course, the way Lachlan's been keeping his voice low and monotone, makes it quite clear he's used to having adult conversations in the company of little ears.

"I'm so sorry," I say, matching his tone. "I can't even imagine."

He nods. Maybe because there really aren't any words for moments like these. Memories like these. "They wound up with their aunt, but she was barely old enough to take care of herself, let alone the two of them. From that moment on, Jack always felt responsible for Riley. Every choice he made for his life, he made with her in mind."

I sense this story is on the verge of another tragic turn. "How did she become your responsibility?" I ask, saving him from having to fill in the gap leading up to this moment, a moment I know he's moving toward because it's the moment that prompted him to tell this story to begin with.

His shoulders sag and his face turns stoic, no glimmer of a smile left anywhere, not even his eyes, which he casts at the ground. "Jack was killed in the line of duty four years ago. He was shot during a domestic disturbance." He sighs painfully. "Riley never really came to terms with losing their parents. Always struggled with her grief until her grief turned into depression and anxiety and eventually, a variety of addictions, each more severe and less legal than the next." He shakes his head, anger turning his mouth into a grim line. "Jack had her in and out of places trying to get her help. She was finally clean, working a decent job. Then he died. And she fell into an abyss so deep and so dark, she couldn't find her way out this time."



LACHLAN

I DON'T REMEMBER THE last time I put all of this into words and said them out loud. Maybe I never really have. Everyone I've talked to about Monroe's life has been in it for long enough to know the dark, twisted tale that brought her to me. Now I can't help but wonder about the dark and twisted tale that will ultimately take her away.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be burdening you with all of this," I tell her, snapping out of the black shadow that's been shrouding me since I stumbled down memory lane.

"No burden," Greer assures me softly. "You can keep going if you like, see it through. I get the feeling you don't talk about this often." She pauses, hesitant to continue. "It's important, you know? To let it out every once in a while. It's hard to know what we're really thinking or feeling if we don't allow ourselves to express it."

"You moonlight as a shrink when you're not nannying or acting?" I joke trying to let a little light in again.

"Well, connecting thoughts to feelings and then expressing them is kind of the basis of acting, so no." One corner of her mouth lifts, creating a silly but adorable half grin on her gorgeous face. "I've just worked my way through the steps often enough to see the benefits of doing it."

I shake my head at the thought. "I'd definitely suck at acting then."

Her half grin takes a tender curve until she's smiling, and her dark brown eyes look directly at me. Look through me. "Not into sharing your feelings, huh?"

“Just learned not to, I suppose.” I hear Monroe let out a frustrated squeal and realize her swing is no longer moving. I have no idea when I stopped pushing her, but I start back up again as soon as I notice I’ve stopped. Within seconds, she’s giggling again. I love the sound. I love all of her sounds, love how easily she’s able to communicate her needs to me, how vocal she is about everything. It’s not something I ever want her to change. And she would. If she stayed with me. “My father’s side of the family isn’t much for feelings,” I explain. My tone has an edge to it I wasn’t expecting. The anger that’s been building over the last few weeks is inching its way to the surface and it seems I’m slowly losing control of it. I clear my throat and try again. “Their work keeps them in the public eye a lot. According to my grandmother, emotions make you appear weak, and appearing weak, is never an option when you’re a Westergaard.”

Greer frowns for a split second but covers it quickly with a more lighthearted smirk. “Maybe while you’re here you can just lean into your Brenson side. Chase certainly knows how to express his feelings. And I know your mom, so I know you have those genes too.” She bumps me playfully with her elbow. “The Westergaards need never know.” Then she winks, as if to seal the deal on our secret.



CHAPTER SIX

GREER Our time together at the park comes to an end shortly after Lachlan let down his guard. A move I can't help but feel he regretted just as soon as he made it given excuses of naptime and snacks and work and more naptime, spilled from his lips in the aftermath. And so, we parted ways. Him back to the apartment across from mine and me back to Nora's with the kids to tackle lunch and wait for the other half of her horde to come home from school.

Once back at home, it's easy to slip into autopilot and let my mind wander, rehashing every word, analyzing every tone, trying to read between the lines and see beyond the things he said out loud. Even though Lachlan shared far more than I would have expected him to, it now feels as if there's twice as much still to tell where he and Mo are concerned. I know Chase holds the answer to my every curiosity piqued beyond recovery after Lachlan's speech at the swings, but there's no way I can go to him and have them satisfied. It would feel like a complete betrayal of trust, to go behind Lachlan's back and get the details he so intentionally left out of the story. No, I'll just have to wait. Be patient. Not exactly one of the stronger aspects of my personality, but one I will work especially hard to cultivate while Lachlan is here. And who knows? Maybe he'll come around to telling me the rest of the story in his own time. Provided his own time comes to pass before the week is over and he heads back home.

Home.

Sadness stings my chest as the thought becomes clearer in my mind and the understanding of it takes root. Lachlan doesn't live here. He's just visiting. A fact that seemed easy to accept when it was first introduced yesterday morning, but which now, only a day later, feels hard to swallow.

He's barely been here, and I already can't imagine him being gone.

"That's going to be a problem," I grumble to myself.

"There's no mac and cheese?" Aiden pipes up, startling me from my daze and making me aware of my surroundings in the blink of an eye.

I'm in the pantry. Judging by the bag of marshmallows in one hand and the can of kidney beans in the other, operating on autopilot stopped working a while ago.

I look down at Aiden, his hand pushing on my knee, head poking past my thigh, trying to see for himself. "There's always mac and cheese," I assure him, tapping the shelf above my eye level to draw his attention up. "See? Whole stash of boxes up here on the pasta shelf with your mom's fancy grown up macaroni." Every shape and color can be found in large, glass storage containers. Nora hardly ever has time to cook, but she likes her kitchen to feel like she does it often, same as she keeps a basket of books she never gets around to reading near the sofa. I like it though. Makes everything feel homier somehow.

"Then what's the problem?" Aiden asks, little brow crinkling.

"There's no problem." I shrug, pulling two boxes down before I usher him out of the pantry and close the door on it.

"You said 'that's going to be a problem'," he repeats my own words back to me.

"Oh, right." Now I can't help but wonder what else I've been muttering out loud since my thoughts took off after Lachlan. "I was thinking of making s'mores dip for dessert, but the marshmallows are stale, so that's going to be a problem," I improvise. Which is different from lying.

“Can we make pudding?” Aiden. Solution oriented as always. “Mom just got butterscotch. And that’s my favorite.”

“I’m aware.” I smile at him, making my way over to the stove to get lunch going. “And yes, pudding is a definite possibility.”

“Yay!” He claps his hands with excitement, already dashing from the room to tell Liz who won’t care about pudding one way or the other, but will share in his delight, nonetheless.

I get busy cooking and thoughts of Lachlan finally start to fall to the back of my mind, making room for more pertinent things like prepping fruit and veggie sides for lunch, preparing snacks for the older kids once they get home and, of course, getting pudding started for dessert.

From there, things continue to stay busy enough to keep my mind focused on the present. Emmery and Sila get home first, followed by Rylne, the oldest and the only one in middle school, shortly after.

I’ve got everyone fed, the big kids doing homework and the little ones napping, when the doorbell rings. I freeze for a second or two after, listening for a cry, signaling the bell startled someone awake. When everything remains silent, I rush for the door, hoping to get there in time to keep whoever is on the other side of it from ringing the bell a second time.

“Abbas?” I ask, even as I’m opening the door. “What are you doing here?”

He holds up a bag of pastries in one hand and a tray of coffees in the other. “Was in the neighborhood and no one likes to drink alone.” He smirks.

I step aside, letting him enter. “Why were you in the neighborhood?” Abbas is the head artist at some bigtime ad agency. Or so I’m told. It’s not my area, but he does get paid more than the rest of us, so I’m guessing there’s some truth to it. Plus, he works a ton of hours, making this surprise visit all the more out of the ordinary. “Did you quit your job? Get fired? What’s happening?”

He makes a face. “Neither. I’m on a break. Been stuck on a project and just needed to clear my head a bit. Thought you might enjoy a coffee, and some grownup conversation.” He starts to turn back for the door. “But I can leave if that’s not the case.”

“There’s no need to be mean to me, Abbas,” I mumble, snatching a coffee from the tray before he can threaten to leave with it again. “Obviously I’m *pleasantly* surprised,” I clarify what clearly hasn’t been coming across. “I just wanted to make sure it was appropriate to be as happy as I am at the sight of you.”

“And coffee,” he adds dryly.

“And coffee,” I agree before I finish, “I didn’t want to commit to said happiness only to make things really awkward when you tell me the bad news a moment later.”

“What bad news?”

“The bad news you could have had for coming here to surprise me,” I tell him, leading the way into the living room, “which we now know doesn’t exist. So now I’m just happy. With you.”

“And coffee.”

“You don’t have to keep rubbing in what a shallow friend I am. Yes, the coffee is nice. And yes, I was more attached to making the coffee stay than you, but,” I argue, plopping into the large sectional and waiting for Abbas to do the same, “if it helps at all, I’m going to enjoy your company even once the coffee is gone and can no longer be enjoyed.”

“Yeah. Because I brought cookies too.” He tosses the paper bag into my lap, grinning.

Meanwhile, he’s brought more than just the cookies to my attention. “Why though?” I narrow my eyes, glaring at him suspiciously, stare never wavering even as I bring the cup to my lips and have another sip. “Why are you here, bribing me with coffee and cookies?”

Abbas makes a sound caught between a gasp and a sigh, like he's outraged but also surrendering. "Fine. I need to talk."

"About?" Two guys unloading their deep dark secrets to me in one day. Must be something in the air.

He shifts around uncomfortably for a few seconds before he gives up on trying to relax and instead scoots to the edge of the cushion, sitting up completely straight. "Has Mal said anything to you?"

I roll my eyes from side to side. "Mal says a lot of things to me. You're going to have to narrow it down a bit if you're looking for a more specific answer, Abbas."

"About me. Has Mal said anything to you about me." He looks nervous. I think. I'm not sure I've ever seen Abbas look nervous, but if I had, this is what I imagine it would look like.

I try not to frown, but I still can't tell where this conversation is going, and I'm a little scared I might say the wrong thing. It's tricky territory. Mal and Abbas are friends. We all are. Best friends. Hell, some might argue we're family. But, Mal's also had a crush on Abbas since the first time she met him. A top secret, never to be uttered in the presence of anyone ever, crush. So, I can't mention it now. But I also don't want to say anything to suggest the opposite if he's about to reveal these secret feelings are mutual. "Again," I say slowly, "an extremely broad spectrum of possible answers."

"So, no." He sighs. For real this time. And he follows it up with falling dramatically into the couch pillows behind him.

I'm definitely confused now. "Abbas, what exactly were you hoping she said to me?"

He closes his eyes, running both hands over his face before letting the tips of his fingers rest on his chin. Then he takes a deep breath and says, "Mal and I have been sleeping together for the last month."

I almost spit coffee across the room. Which would have been bad, not just because I don't believe in wasting coffee so frivolously but also because Nora is a psycho who has five kids and a white sofa. A pristine and stainless white sofa.

"When you say sleeping?" I say after some prolonged efforts of trying to swallow and not choke on the coffee I managed not to spit.

"I mean the naked, *not sleeping*, sleeping together."

"Are you sure?"

Now it's his turn to frown. "How many people are confused about whether or not they're having sex with someone?" He shakes his head at my question, which to be fair, was pretty asinine. "Yes, I'm sure."

"But...how?"

His face tugs deeper into disbelief. "How?"

"Maybe I mean when. Like, how have you been sleeping together for the last month without anyone noticing?" Then it occurs to me that I may be the only one who hasn't noticed. "Wait, does Chase know?"

"No." He pulls himself upright again, resting both elbows on his knees and clasping his hands, popping his knuckles. Definitely nervous. "No one knows. First time was this crazy, in the moment, decision the night I helped her go through her great uncle's storage unit and found all of his old bourbon bottles." No need to elaborate there. "Last time was yesterday." His gaze shifts sideways. "I wasn't really binge-watching TV. Just had the sound system up to drown out any other possible sounds."

“Ew.” As much as I want this conversation to stop, I also really want it to continue. Especially after my chat with Lachlan. I can’t waste a juicy secret chat where the possibility to ask questions is so readily available to me. “So, noises aside, are you guys like...seeing each other?”

He shrugs. “That’s the thing. I don’t really know what the hell we’re doing. We just drop hints that we’re going to be alone and have a cover story in place and then the other shows up. And... you know.”

“I do now.” My eyes bug out at him. This is big. Really big.

“But you’re her best friend,” he says, sounding almost defeated. “And she hasn’t told you about it. That can’t be a good sign. I mean, years of hearing my sisters tell each other every little thing about every boy they ever liked, confirms this is not a good thing.”

I tip my head back and forth between each shoulder, mulling things over. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“How?” His brow is still furrowed, but I can hear the hope returning to his voice and I’m starting to think he has genuine feelings for her.

“You’re kind of a whore, Abbas,” I remind him of the reputation he’s so thoroughly enjoyed establishing over the last decade or so. “Most best friends tend to talk each other out of sleeping with whores. So, the fact she hasn’t told me about hooking up with you might just mean she doesn’t want to be talked out of it.”

He grimaces painfully. “Or it means she’s too ashamed to tell you.”

“Eh.” I shrug. “Given the shameful things she’s told me in the past, I wouldn’t lean in that direction. It’s more likely she doesn’t want to hear all the reasons it’s a bad idea to be sleeping with a slutty guy who’s probably just into casual while she’s had the hots for him for the last seven years or so.”

“Wait, what?”

And there it is. The moment I had hoped to avoid coming to, already having slipped straight from my mouth without hesitation or any way to reel it back in. Still, my hand flies to my lips. A futile gesture at this point, which does nothing to stop what’s already happened and only displays the instant regret I’m experiencing now that it has. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

But it’s too late. Abbas is practically salivating, inching his way to the edge of the couch until he’s sitting there, perched with anticipation, eager to hear more. “Oh, no, you definitely were. And you should tell me more.” He nods, eyes hungry for the insight he’s hoping to hear. “A lot more.”

“I have a crush on Lachlan,” I blurt out, helpless to undo the betrayal and desperate to return karmic balance to my friendship with Mal.

“What?” The previous anticipation has turned to bewilderment on Abbas’s face. “Who cares about you and Lachlan? We’re talking about me and Mal.”

“Not anymore.” I purse my lips tightly, physically sealing off the vault of secrets. Not that there are many left on the topic beyond what I already let slip. Mallory’s secret harboring of feelings for Abbas spanning the length of their relationship kind of covers everything. Any other details I’ve collected in the vault on the subject really only serve to support that one singular truth. She’s totally bananas for him. And he’s totally bananas for the slut-life. Until now, it seems.

“Listen, Abbas,” I explain calmly, choosing my words carefully in hopes they will lead me out of my current predicament with ease and grace, though it’s rare I manage either in life. “I can’t tell you anything Mal has told me. I am however more than happy to listen to you talk to me about Mal and your feelings, and if you’re interested, I’m even willing to convey said feelings and scout out the situation for you in an honest, up front and all cards on the table sort of way,” I make my good offer,

the one I want him to take, before I give him the back up. "Or we can talk about my secret crush and how pointless it is to like a guy who's going to leave again before the week is over."

Abbas considers his options, eyes narrowed and jaw tight with displeasure. Then, slowly, his face softens again. "You're a good friend, Greer. A weird one. But still, a good one."

"That mean we're going to talk about my feelings for Chase's hot brother?" I ask, grinning.

"No." He shakes his head, fairly adamantly at that. "I don't need to know the details about your crush on Prince Lachlan."

I laugh. "He is pretty regal, isn't he? So strange to think him and Chase grew up in the same house, with the same mom."

"Yeah." He sounds like he's losing interest in my love life already. I notice his eyes start to move around the apartment. Even from the living room, you can see into the kitchen and dining area. "Also, where are all the kids you're supposed to be watching right now?"

"Their rooms. The big ones are doing homework and the little ones are sleeping," I inform him. I have to assume from his curiosity, we're about to delve into his side of the Mallory and Abbas tale, and it's not likely to be child appropriate.

"Isn't it kind of late in the day for naptime?" Only not strange because he's an uncle to like a hundred nieces and nephews.

"Normally, yes. But since evenings are the only real time Nora gets to see the kids during the week, we have late naps so that they're nice and perky when she gets home," I explain. "Can we circle back around to you now? You are planning to tell me more about you and Mal, right?"

A dirty grin pulls at the corners of his mouth. With Abbas, that's all the answer I need.



LACHLAN

I'VE SPENT THE LAST two days avoiding Greer. After unloading all my personal baggage on her at the playground, I just haven't been able to face her. Not when I know I never finished telling her the whole story. Especially not since the parts I omitted are parts I don't intend to share. It's not that I don't trust her. It's just...simpler this way. And I could use a little simple in my life right now. Or maybe I just can't use any more complicated. Either way, the distance between us has been important to maintain even if it hasn't been easy.

The concept of boundaries and privacy is lost on all four of them. Chase, Abbas, Mal and definitely Greer, go busting in and out of each other's apartments at all hours of the day and night. I'm not sure any of them even know how to lock a door. If they do, it's certainly not a skill they make use of.

"You don't look convinced," Chase says from across the table, his half-eaten oatmeal abandoned for a banana he's slathered in peanut butter and took a giant bite of right before talking to me.

"You don't look like you have basic table manners," I mutter back.

"Your kid just shoved a fruit loop up her nostril," Abbas adds from my left. "You know, if we're tracking people's table manners."

I hurry to undo the cereal mishap before it gets lodged in there enough to require a pediatrician. "And I'm not convinced," I grumble, responding to Chase's initial observation. "But I'm not sure this is the sort of thing anyone can ever be fully convinced of."

He sets down his banana and I can't help but wonder if he's going to finish any part of his breakfast this morning. "Seems to me, this is the sort of thing one ought to be completely, one hundred

and fifty percent, zero doubts whatsoever, convinced of.”

“You wouldn’t really know, would you,” I remind him. “You don’t have a kid. Or the same responsibilities.”

“Is this going to get so ugly that I wind up wishing I’d excused myself and left the table while it was still possible without being too awkward?” Abbas asks, coffee in hand but hovering halfway between the table and his mouth, as if his taking a drink of it depends on our answer.

“We’re not going to scream and throw dishes like your sisters,” Chase tells him.

“Do they really throw dishes?” I ask, happy to jump on the detour hoping it will distract Chase enough to keep from revisiting this topic. At least through breakfast.

Abbas nods. “Once, my youngest sister broke a plate over my oldest sister’s head.” He shrugs. “It’s not true what they say. You can’t knock sense into people. At least not in a literal, physical way.”

“I still might try it though,” Chase mutters, going back to his oatmeal. “Just let me empty this bowl. It’s already chipped, so I won’t mind sacrificing it.”

I’m torn between responding with a scathing remark to shut him up or trying to defend my choices for the hundredth time to him. Choices feels like the wrong word. Decisions.

Thankfully, the door swings open, absolving me of having to respond at all.

“There you are,” Greer says loudly, pointing at me as soon as she comes marching in.

“Was I missing?” I ask, feigning ignorance.

“I doubt that.” She pulls out the chair between me and Chase, well, technically Monroe and Chase since her highchair is also at the table, and has a seat. “Hiding might be more like it.”

“From you?” I’m pushing it. I’m clearly busted.

“It’s fine. You’re not the first dude to get all raw and vulnerable only to up and disappear on me.” She stares straight at me as she says it, face completely serious. This girl pulls no punches. I haven’t decided yet if it’s my favorite thing about her or the thing I find most terrifying. Might be both.

“Raw and vulnerable.” Chase takes an eager bite of his banana again, peanut butter sticking to the crease of his mouth. “Do tell.”

“Or don’t,” I add. “Isn’t there some sort of playground confidentiality agreement?”

“Like a ‘what happens at the swings, stays at the swings’ policy?” She smiles and for a moment I think she’s going to go easy on me.

“Exactly like that.”

Then, the smile drops. “Nope.”

Abbas laughs just as he’s having another drink of his coffee, causing him to choke on it. “Sorry,” he coughs, obviously still trying to clear his throat. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please, go on. It was just getting entertaining.”

“What’s entertaining?” Mal asks, practically zooming into the room, door slamming shut behind her. “Chase’s need to match his underwear to his socks?”

All eyes turn toward my brother. “It’s not entertaining. It’s just a sensible fashion choice.”

“It’s a little weird,” Greer says, taking his spoon and picking over his oatmeal, while Mal nudges him with her hip until he scoots over just enough for her to sit on half of his chair.

“You match your bra and panties,” he counters.

Greer stops short of shoving a spoonful of oatmeal into her mouth. “No, I don’t.”

“Mal does,” Abbas chimes in.

Now all eyes turn toward him.

He starts choking again. This time, no coffee is involved. “I’ve done laundry with her,” he says, trying to explain, “it was hard not to notice all the matching sets.”

“I bet,” Greer mumbles. Her mouth is full, but I can’t help but think I detect a hint of a smirk there even as she’s chewing.

“If it wasn’t Chase’s underwear, what were you all talking about when I walked in?” Mal scans the table for a second before stretching her arm across Greer and helping herself to some of the cereal on Monroe’s highchair. Abbas and I exchange a look, but neither of us mentions the nostril-fruit-loop situation.

“Apparently, my brother unveiled his rarely seen sensitive side in front of Greer and then avoided her, hoping she’d forget. Or something.” Chase shrugs. “Close, right?”

“Oh.” Mal looks almost disappointed. “I already heard about that.”

“Great,” I say loudly, hoping to put an end to the chaotic topic jumping, especially when so many of the topics involve me, “now that everyone is all caught up, maybe we can talk about more relevant things. Like what everyone has on their schedule today.”

“No one thinks that’s a relevant thing,” Abbas informs me. “We all know each other’s schedules.”

“We have our calendars linked,” Mal adds, holding up her phone.

I exhale a long, loud breath, trying hard not to let their insane insistence for completely integrated personal spaces get the best of me. “Okay, well, since I’m not linked with everyone,” I start again, “Greer, what is your availability today?”

“Depends.” She folds both hands in her lap and just stares at me.

“On?”

“Well, I’m not available to go commit any felonies today. Schedule’s too tight. But I could fit in a lunch date. Or make myself available to jump on a plane and take the starring role in any major motion picture being filmed today in Hollywood. But I’m definitely not available to take a random drive up to Canada. Also, I don’t have a car. And no time to go purchase one.” She holds her serious expression for another count or two. Then, she grins. “I’m also available to watch Mo, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The entire table is silent, waiting for my response. I don’t give them the satisfaction of losing my shit though.

“From, say, one to three? Would that work?”

She nods, going back for more oatmeal and scooping another hearty serving onto her spoon before leading it straight to her mouth. This time, I can see her grinning even while she chews. “Yup.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

GREER

G “Remember how I said I’d have an extra baby in tow one day this week?” I greet Nora as soon as I let myself in. Having a key to her place is kind of required for the job.

“Is today that day?” she calls back from the kitchen. Even though three out of five kids have already vacated the premises and boarded their designated buses to school, the place is still buzzing with the chaotic energy of getting everyone out the door in time.

“It is.”

She steps out of the kitchen and into the open space making up the dining and living areas, giving her full view of me as I unravel my scarf at the door and kick off my boots to get settled in for a while indoors.

“You don’t have a baby,” she observes dryly. “Did you lose it on your way here? Because that could make a person with five children in your care a little nervous.”

“The baby arrives at one.” I shake my head, laughing as I move through the apartment and make my way past her toward the kitchen. I could do with another cup of coffee and Nora always makes extra. “Also, if I were the sort to lose a kid, I think we both know, Aiden would have been gone a long time ago.” I’m not one for microchipping children, but if ever there was a kid who’d make a case for it, Dash-Away-Aiden is it.

She sighs, rolling her eyes toward the heavens. “That reminds me, I forgot to tell you he almost went to live with the chimpanzees at the zoo last weekend.” She shakes her head, following me to the coffee maker and the cup she left behind there on the counter, half full. “Let him go with his grandma, you know, the paternal one.” She makes a face. We’re not big fans. “And less than an hour later, I get a call from zoo security telling me they found my child and could I please come and get him.” She takes a sip before she goes on. “Never did hear from Grandma Sue.” Hence, why we’re not big fans.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “Maybe you should have left him. Aiden could have been happy there.”

She looks unimpressed with my suggestion.

Then we both laugh.

“Speaking of boys who make us crazy. How are things going with Chase’s brother?” She wiggles her brows in a way that almost makes me start giggling all over again. But just almost. Nothing about Lachlan makes me want to giggle as of late. Ever since he melted a brief hole in that steely demeanor of his and let me see his soft and vulnerable side, his history, and above all, his pain, I’ve been running out of good reasons to categorize feelings for him as a bad thing. Outside of the obvious distance factor, he’s not providing much to help me talk myself out of totally falling for him. And that, is clearly not an option.

“I told you, Nora. Nothing is going anywhere or any which way with Chase’s brother. He’s just visiting. And I’m just helping him out,” I recap the points I covered already on Monday night when she caught me on a Lachlan high after our surprise playdate at the swing set.

“And I told you, Greer,” she says in what I know from experience to be her mom voice, “I hear you talk about loads of boys day in and day out and I’ve never seen you light up while talking about them the way you did the other night talking about this one.”

I make a face. “Loads of boys?”

She grimaces right back at me, eyes bulging a bit for effect. “Chase.”

“Is gay. And he still lights me up plenty.”

“Abbas.”

“Is my whory neighbor, he doesn’t count. Plus, he’s sleeping with Mal.”

Nora seems temporarily distracted in her countdown. “Wait, what? No, I won’t be derailed.” She shakes her head, determination rebuilding on her face as she does. “But I’m gonna wanna come back to that.”

“As expected.” I gesture for her to go on. “But you were saying about loads. And boys.” Now that we’ve covered the two most obvious names, which admittedly, I mention a lot, I’m willing to bet her list is a lot shorter than she anticipated.

“Right. Trevor. Max. Benton. Luke. Ronnie. Wes.” She counts using the fingers on her right hand, then moves on to her left. “Justin. Steve. Philip. Vince. Morris.” When she runs out of fingers, she stops. Also, it’s a good thing I’m not much for gambling.

“Did you memorize the playbill from my last performance?” I ask, brow crinkled, and eyes narrowed.

“Only three of them were in your last play,” she retorts. “And I don’t know that from the playbill, I know that because you told me.”

“I didn’t realize I overshared so much,” I grumble, moving through the kitchen toward the pantry. This coffee needs something dunked in it and Nora always keeps a secret stash of cookies on the top shelf.

“Oh, you definitely do,” she goes on, following me across the room. “But it’s totally normal. Only natural to have an excess of words desperate to be used after spending the day with five kids. Trust me, I do the same thing on the weekends when my mother calls to catch up on Sunday nights.” She waits for me to retrieve the cookies before she goes on, “Now that we’ve established I was right and I know what the hell I’m talking about, can you start talking about the thing I actually wanted to hear about? I have, like, five minutes before I have to kiss my kids goodbye and run from the apartment.”

I sigh, taking out a cookie and holding it in my cup to let it soak up an appropriate amount of coffee before I pop it into my mouth and surrender to the inevitable. “I can’t like him.”

“Why not?” Then she seems to remember. “Is this about your career before boys thing?”

“I told you about that too?” Seems like a poor choice, confiding in her about my goals to give up nannying.

“That you’re not dating until you’re no longer my nanny?” She nods grimly. “Yeah. And I’m assuming you didn’t mean that to imply all my kids were grown and your services were no longer needed.”

“If it helps at all, I have zero prospects of making this goal a reality anytime soon. The rate I’m going, your kids *will* be grown. And I’ll have nannied for them and their kids as well.” I reach for another cookie. “And yes, it’s that thing. I don’t know why everyone is making it sound like it’s a dumb thing. It’s not a dumb thing. It’s a responsible thing.” Which reminds me. “You know what else is a responsible thing? Not falling for a guy who is only in town for a week and then goes back home. To another country.”

“This country have closed borders or something?”

“I don’t know,” I scoff. “No. Probably not.”

“You’re scared of airplanes?” she goes on. “Don’t know how to facetime? Still use a landline to make international calls? What?”

“No, to all of those things.” I can hear the exasperation in my voice, and I try to calm myself before I say anything else. “It’s just...”

“Your dream means more to you than anything,” Nora finishes for me.

I bite my lip, wondering if it's selfish to feel this way. Then I remember it would be more selfish to deny it and pretend otherwise. "It does."

She leans in to take a cookie from the box. She must have finished her coffee at some point during this discussion, because she takes a bite of it dry. Still good, but not preferable if coffee and dunking are available options. She crunches away for several moments before she speaks again. "Who says you have to choose?"

Then she winks at me before turning to walk out of the kitchen, heading down the hall to the bedrooms to say goodbye to Aiden and Liz before running out the front door as she predicted she would.

Once it's just me and the kids, the morning shapes up in a normal fashion as we fall into our regular routines and no one expresses anymore interest in my love life. Perks of hanging with people in their single digits, I suppose.

Lachlan shows up with Monroe just as I'm fixing lunch and the whole exchange ends up taking only a few minutes with me tied up in cooking and him having to run right back out to make it to his appointment with Triston.

Mo blends into our little trio easily, making for a happy foursome as we head out for a little adventure before the big kids come home from school. The weather's not enticing enough to head for the playground, so instead, I bundle everyone up, strap Mo and Liz into Nora's stroller and take them all for a walk down to my father's bookstore.

It's just a block and half from the apartment, giving us the perfect amount of movement to burn off some of Aiden's afternoon energy without burning him out completely.

"Is it story time?" Aiden calls in sync with the jingling bells on the shop doors as he goes bursting inside.

"It's always story time," my father says from behind his counter at the center of the store. "Or it will be, just as soon as you find the perfect one."

Aiden doesn't need to be told twice. He's been here often enough to know the layout inside and out, and he wastes no time running straight to the back where the children's section is set up, complete with a large sofa and plenty of bean bag chairs, blankets and pillows. There's even an electric fireplace sitting between the bookshelves along the wall. This time of year, it's for heat as well as ambiance.

I'm way past the suggested age for readers, but it's still my favorite part of the shop.

"Have you added to your collection?" my father muses, taking in both girls peering up at him from the stroller, rosy cheeks and smiles for days.

"This is Monroe," I introduce her. "She's Chase's niece. Her and her dad are visiting and I'm just helping out today while he has an appointment."

"Well, you picked the perfect day to come and see me with your new friend," my father says, reaching into the stroller to unbuckle Mo and lift her out, her little arms reaching for him, eager to be freed. "I just got a brand-new rocking chair for the kids' corner and I've been wondering who was going to help me break it in. Liz and Monroe will be perfect for the job."

"Dad, you have no idea. Both these girls are obsessed with swinging," I tell him, getting Liz from the stroller just as soon as my father and Mo are out of the way.

"I found a book," Aiden yells, hurrying toward us. Waving two books in the air.

"Don't you mean you found two?" I tease, laughing at him.

"One is for story time and one is for me," he informs me, looking at me like I'm not nearly as smart as I think I am.

“My mistake.” I press my lips together tightly to keep from laughing anymore. “Alright then, lead the way to the kids’ corner so Papa Reads can start his story telling. I’m excited to hear what you picked out for us,” I tell him, pointing ahead in the same direction he just came from.

“I call purple bean bag,” he shouts, zipping off again.

My dad chuckles, following close behind him.

Me and Liz are last in line, taking our time as we walk through the rows of shelves and I peek through each aisle checking for new displays and titles I haven’t read yet.

When we reach the back, Aiden is busy dragging his purple bean bag over to the rocking chair which my father is already seated in, gently swaying forward and back, much to Mo’s delight.

“I guess that means we get the sofa,” I tell Liz, snagging a quilt from the blanket basket on the way. “Let’s go snuggle in and find out what book Aiden picked out for Papa Reads to share with us today.”

Liz smushes her cheek to mine at the word snuggle. She just started doing it a week or two ago, but it’s my new favorite form of affection from her.



LACHLAN

THE LITTLE SHOP OF Stories is every bit what you’d expect from the name. It’s cozy and warm and welcoming in every way possible. Between the smell of coffee and hot chocolate mingling with cinnamon and clove, the quiet music playing in the background and the wall-to-wall shelves of books and book-related art and illustrations, it’s the homiest store I’ve ever set foot in. The living room furniture placed all throughout doesn’t hurt matters either, nor does the fact that Monroe’s giggling is the first thing I hear upon entering.

For a moment, the last two hours disappear. The days before, melt away, and even the weeks leading up to coming here, begin to blur. Then my phone rings, jarring me back to all the things I want to deny, and with them the looming decision I know I’ll have to make before the week’s end.

“And?” A voice demands as soon as I answer. It’s a familiar voice. A pushy voice.

“McKenna,” I say as pleasantly as I can muster. “So nice to hear from you.”

“Skip the formalities, your highness. Just get to the point. I’m two flights of stairs away from a surprise visit with a mom I’ve been rooting for despite my better judgment and I could really do with a pick-me-up before I knock on her door and all my worst fears become reality. Again.”

I hesitate before I answer. I hear her talk about her work all the time, but somehow, I never heard her day to day quite like this. Something clicks, and I suddenly get why this situation with Monroe is so hard for her. Because for the last seventeen months, she’s been one of the kids McKenna *didn’t* have to worry about.

“Well, you were right about the checklist,” I tell her, rubbing the back of my head while I tuck back into the section of self-help books in hopes of securing a few minutes of privacy. So far, no one seems to know I’m here yet and I’d like to keep it that way until I finish this conversation. “It was pretty useless in the practical sense. According to the list, Triston is the perfect potential parent, and I shouldn’t think twice about handing him his daughter and wishing them well.”

“I told you the list sucks,” she mumbles, breathing heavier than normal while she climbs the stairs. I’m guessing she was at this for a while already before she called me.

“It really sucks,” I reconfirm. “It especially sucks, because the closer I got to seeing he was meeting all the state’s standard requirements, the more I realized he was meeting none of mine.” I

look around quickly, just to make sure I'm really alone, then I hiss, "He's a total douchebag, McKenna. What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

"You really want me to answer that? Because last time I told you what to do, you kind of stopped talking to me for two weeks and then showed up in person to tell me you decided to do the exact opposite of what I said." Silence follows. She must have reached her floor.

"You're right." I sigh. "I don't want you to answer that." I shake my head, hand moving around from the back of my head to the front to massage my forehead. This conversation is starting to give me a headache. It's only slightly less off-putting than the way my stomach turned every time Triston referred to Monroe as 'the kid' and Riley as 'that chick', like he couldn't remember either of their names.

"Didn't think so." I can hear McKenna start to move again. She must be about done with me. Even though I'm fairly certain I didn't deliver the pick-me-up she was looking for.

"I'll figure something out," I promise. More to myself than to her.

"I know you will. Just make it something we can all live with." Then the line goes dead, and McKenna is gone, off to face her next disappointment. I don't even know which one of us feels worse realizing that I now have to count myself among them.

I don't have much time to wallow in self-pity over my current status as deadbeat parent in McKenna's book though. As soon as I turn around to re-emerge from my hiding spot in the self-help section, I'm face to face with Greer.

"Third shelf down from the top, fifth book from the left," she says, pointing behind me.

"I'm sorry?"

"Boys Cry Too." She raises both brows until her forehead wrinkles. "I assume you're over here looking for some help in that department."

I roll my bottom lip over my teeth and bite down on it with the top row, trying to hide my response before I'm even certain of what it will be. When I realize I'm amused, I start to release my lip again, letting it fall naturally into a smirk. "Must spend a lot of time in this section to be able to offer such specific directions."

"Tarot cards are two shelves down." She shrugs. "Boys Cry Too just happens to be at eye level every time I walk over here to peruse the new decks."

Tarot cards. Yeah, I guess I can see that.

"Hey, didn't I leave my child in your care?" I ask, changing the topic now that I've run out of ways to turn the tables on her with the self-help book section.

"Did you?" She flicks her wrist nonchalantly. "I see so many of them throughout the day, it's hard to keep track."

"Greer," I try to sound stern, but it's hard to look at her when she's so delighted with herself and still pretend to be serious, let alone mad.

"Relax, Papa Bear. She's perfectly safe and happy." She turns and starts walking. "Come on, I'll take you to the back to see her."

As soon as we start moving toward the center of the store, I can hear Monroe's giggling again. Wherever she is and whatever she's doing, she's most definitely happy. And I'm happiest when she is. It's the one thing I keep coming back to through all of this. Even if I can't hear her giggle day in and day out, and even if the thought alone makes some small part of me die inside me every time it crosses my mind, I know, ultimately, if I'm convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt, she's happy, I'll be able to live with it. Even if I don't get to live with her. I can be dead on the inside and still live with it.

Greer stops abruptly. I'm completely unprepared and run into her so hard, I nearly knock her into a large display of book themed coffee cups.

"Whoa," I call out, just as I grab her shoulders to catch her in an attempt to avert any damages. "What are you doing? Why are you stopping?"

She barely acknowledges the near collision with ceramics, let alone the actual crash between us. Instead, she's facing me, hand on my chest and pushing me backward until I'm tucked away in yet another section of the store, I'd rather not be found in. This time, I'm surrounded by shelves upon shelves of romance novels, and from the looks of some of the covers, not the sweet sort.

"I think I need to hear about how things went with Triston before I take you in there," she says, looking every bit as serious as she sounds.

"What? Why?" I shake my head, already trying to move past her and get back on track to finding my kid. I'm close enough now. I can follow the giggles to locate her. But, before I can get anywhere, her hand is back on my chest, forcing me to a standstill. She's strangely strong for how tiny she is. "Greer, this really isn't any of your business," I tell her, trying my best to sound polite but firm.

"Actually, while I'm responsible for your child, your wellbeing is absolutely my business. Because I can't hand her back to you unless I'm sure you're sound enough to care for her, and frankly, right now, you seem a little out of it."

I have no idea where this is coming from. "I can assure you, I am perfectly sound and totally with it."

"Then why were you talking to yourself the whole way through the store?"

Was I?

"What was I saying?"

Apparently, I'm not helping my case. "If you don't even know, that only proves my point." She leans in closer and whispers. "The last part I heard was about being dead on the inside, k? And maybe you can live with that, but I can't. I can't just let the next few days pass until you leave and never come back and then spend the rest of my life wondering, if you're just out there, going through the motions, dead on the inside."

I frown. "Why are you getting so upset about this? We barely know each other, what difference does it make to you if I'm dead on the inside or not?" I can't even deny what I said. Or claim it won't be true one day very soon if this week plays out the way it's meant to.

She huffs and I think maybe she's not sure why she cares so much either. "You're Chase's brother."

"So?"

"I love Chase like he's *my* brother," she argues. "And if I feel like he's *my* brother and you're *his* brother, then —"

"Then I'm like your brother too?" I finish. Then I internalize the sigh which follows the conclusion. I also internalize the thoughts that surge through me along with the sigh. Apparently, brotherly is *not* how I feel about her.

Meanwhile, she seems temporarily at the end of her argument. "I just care, okay? I'm a caring person. My father raised me to be a decent human being with empathy. It's a good thing. Stop making it weird and start telling me what's going on. Is Triston bad news? Did he deny she was his? What happened?"

I close my eyes and take a breath. When I open them again, they lock instantly on hers. I know the second they do, I'm about to tell her everything. Not just about today. But every last detail that brought me here.



CHAPTER EIGHT

G REER

It takes some convincing, but Lachlan finally accepts that Monroe is perfectly fine in my father's care and relaxes enough to allow me to shove him into the loveseat tucked away in the travel and geography section near the windows to talk.

"Don't you have other kids getting out of school right around now you have to get home to?" he tries one last time to sway me from settling in to have this conversation we are most definitely having.

"Not today. One has basketball, the other is on the dance team and the third is going home with a friend today to work on a science project for the fair this weekend." I smile serenely, fluttering my lashes at him like a semi-psycho. "Nice try though." I make my smile disappear as fast as I plastered it on. "Now talk."

He nods, facing forward and rubbing his hands together nervously. For a moment, I feel like he's having the conversation inside his head, forgetting to say the words out loud so I can hear them. Then, he turns his head with a start and the words come out. "How much exactly do you know about me?"

"You can't open with a question." I scoot my butt into the corner between the back and the armrest, pulling my legs up to cross them while I sit facing him as much as possible.

"Why not? It's an important question."

"Because," I explain, "posing a question from the start leads to me doing the talking and not you."

"Fine." He rolls his eyes at me before he returns to staring straight ahead. "If I'm not allowed to ask anything, can I assume you don't know anything about my father's family business?"

"That's a question, too," I point out. "But assume away. Also, what is your father's family business?"

He tilts his head in my direction again. "I'm about to get to that."

"It's all very mysterious." I fold my arms over my chest, leaning back into the crease. "Whatever it is, he must be pretty successful to have felt so strongly about passing it on to you that he put it in the custody agreement. I've never heard of that before either, by the way. How does a parent retain any rights to the kid once said kid is of age? I mean, what if you had grown up and said, no thanks, I'd rather be a plumber. Or a teacher. Or an astronaut. What would have happened? Could he have taken you to court to sue you for custody of yourself?" When I'm done babbling on about my own curiosities, I notice he's busy staring at me, mouth gaping and eyes a little buggy. "Listen, for future reference, don't hold out on me so long with information next time. If I'm not privy to enough details, my brain does a thing. It's not pretty. These are the results."

"Noted." He brings his jaw back in and puts his eyeballs back. "Can I tell you all the stuff you want to know now, or did you have more insane theories you wanted to share before I give you the reality, which to be fair, will probably sound like something you made up anyway."

"Your real life is as crazy as my imagination?" I'm both exquisitely intrigued and profoundly doubtful.

"Has your imagination cooked up a scenario in which I'm a prince, first born to my father, King Apstel of Linden, and thus set to rule come his sixty-fifth birthday and consequent age of retirement, which is less than a month from now?"

I'm not sure how to respond to that. Mainly, because he said it with such a straight face, I have to believe he was being serious, but at the same time, I also have to believe he's fucking with me. "You're a prince."

“Yes.” He nods. “Prince Lachlan of Linden. That’s my title. Fancy, right?”

“Hold on.” I put my finger up, gesturing for him to wait while I make a very necessary phone call.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling your brother.” I can’t commit to this conversation until I have verbal confirmation from Chase that Lachlan is telling the truth. Without it, I’ll be forced to jump back and forth between snarky sarcasm and sincerity, unable to decipher if I’m being confided in or made fun of, and not wanting to risk being wrong about either.

“I have a no phones policy in my classroom,” Chase grumbles into the receiver.

“I don’t know why you always say that when you answer the phone you clearly have in your classroom,” I retort. “Also, is your brother really a prince?”

“Yes. Soon to be king, actually. Weird, right?”

“No,” I nod though, “totally believable.”

“Sure, it is. I gotta go now. You know, because no phones.”

“In your classroom. I know.”

He hangs up. Even after I hear it, I check the screen to be sure. Well, I check the screen to have something to look at other than Lachlan. Now that it turns out he wasn’t messing with me, I feel a little dumb having called Chase.

“Need another minute?” Lachlan asks quietly.

“Yes.” I turn my head to face him again. “Probably best not to give it to me though. God only knows the thoughts I will conjure if left to my own devices.”

He smirks. “They’ve already started collecting, haven’t they?”

“Do I curtsy when I see you now? Am I even allowed to make eye contact when I talk to you? Should I be calling you Prince Lachlan, or your highness? Oh my God, have I been swearing around you? Called you an ass to your face?”

“Have you called me an ass behind my back?” He looks surprisingly hurt at the thought.

“I mean, I might have. When you decided to avoid me for two days,” I admit.

“That’s fair, I guess.” He frowns for a second longer before he shakes it off and goes on, “And as far as everything else goes, you don’t have to treat me any differently than you have up until now. I’m a prince in Linden. Here, I’m just Chase’s older brother, okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

“My turn to do more talking?”

I nod again. “Yes, please.”

“See, now that was way too polite,” he teases.

“Fine, but only because I’m freaked out right now, not because I’m trying to treat you all royal like,” I insist. Though I’m not sure it’s any better. “Do more of the talking so I can do less of the thinking.” I wave my hand impatiently, urging him to continue.

He chuckles but obliges. “As heir to the throne, it was kind of important that I move back to Linden once I was of age, so while it wasn’t officially part of the custody agreement,” he makes a silly face at me, “it was part of the arrangement my parents made and one I agreed to once I was old enough to understand.” He takes a moment, and I can’t help but wonder how much he really agreed to and how much he understood that the plan was set in motion before he had a choice. Before he was even born. “Even before I was of age, I spent plenty of time at the castle, learning the language, the traditions, the culture. But things changed the day I moved in and wasn’t just a visitor. I became the prince I’d been told my whole life I was, and now, for the first time in my life, I had to act like one.”

“Hosted a lot of balls, waiting for a magical young maiden to leave behind a glass slipper?” I joke, making an awkward effort to rejoin our chat as my usual self.

He smiles. Even if he’s not buying my humor, he seems to appreciate the gesture. “Surprisingly, no. That part, I might have enjoyed.”

“You don’t like being a prince?”

“I loved it, to tell you the truth. Until a few weeks ago. Now, I hate it. But, I’m also more passionate about it than ever.” His smile turns crooked. “If that makes any sense at all.”

“It does not.” I grin back at him. “And I can make sense out of a lot of nonsensical things.”

“I’m aware. I’ve heard your ramblings,” he teases. Then, slowly, his expression turns serious. Sad even.

“What happened a few weeks ago?” I ask, coming back to the moment his feelings about being royal changed.

“My grandmother called a meeting. She’s no longer queen, but she’s still the Westergaard matriarch and she may not rule the country anymore, but the same cannot be said for our family.” He sits up a little taller and I notice he’s gone from rubbing his palms together to kneading his fingers. Where before he was nervous, now I think he’s in pain. “My stepmother’s the one behind it all, I know she is, but it doesn’t matter. Not now that she got my grandmother to side with her.”

“Side with her about what?”

He sighs, falling backwards into the sofa cushions like an act of defeat. “Monroe.”

This time, I don’t ask any questions. I don’t have any. The mere mention of her name, froze my brain, made me too scared to contemplate the directions the next wave of revelations could go from here.

So, I wait. I wait with a patience even I didn’t know I possessed.

“Chase isn’t my only younger brother,” Lachlan says after what feels like an eternity. “After my parents split and my mother remarried, my father did the same. His bride was a duchess even before she married my father, and both families felt it was a good match. He’s never said as much, but I don’t think love was ever part of the equation.” Lachlan gets quiet again. This time the silence doesn’t last as long. “They were married for just over a year before Apsel Junior was born. And he was five before I even met him. Before then, my mother wouldn’t let me travel to see my father on my own, so he always came to us. My stepmother and brother never joined him though.” He clears his throat. “Apsel and I were never close. For years, I assumed it was due to growing up with so much literal distance between us. Obviously, he and I couldn’t have the relationship Chase and I had when Chase and I lived in the same bedroom the first fifteen years of his life. Still, Apsel was my brother too and I expected our relationship to change, grow closer, once I lived there and we finally had a chance to get to know each other.”

“But that didn’t happen?” I guess, my voice so quiet and soft, I barely recognize it.

He shakes his head. “Turns out, he’s hated me all of his life. Or at least all the years of his life he was old enough to understand that he would never be king because growing up the firstborn and only child in the castle didn’t negate the fact that he wasn’t the actual first-born son my father produced. I was.” He sighs. “I don’t even blame him. I doubt he ever would have cared one way or the other if his mother hadn’t spent his entire life complaining about the injustice of it. She’s the queen, in her mind, her son should be heir. So on, and so forth.” His head rolls back and his lids slide down as if he’s trying to escape the memories.

“I still don’t understand,” I say, trying to free him from the moment in time he seems to be stuck in. “What does any of this have to do with Mo?”

“Nothing,” he says dryly. Then, he sits up, turning his entire body on the couch to better face me. “And everything.”



LACHLAN

THERE'S SOMETHING SURREAL about hearing it all laid out at once. Up until Greer, everyone involved has been there from the beginning, they know how this story started, where it began to unravel and how it is meant to end.

“There are rules in place to protect the crown and the royal blood meant to wear it,” I explain, trying to hold the disgust in my own voice at bay, but it's hard, given all I've learned in recent weeks. “First and foremost, these rules were put in place to ensure the name as well as the bloodline would continue.”

“Meaning?” Greer's brows are furrowed, and since about halfway through this conversation, she's been chewing at the outside of her thumbnail.

“Meaning that the heir to the crown is always the firstborn son,” I start.

“Seems a little sexist,” she mumbles, edge of her thumb still glued to her mouth.

“It's a lot of sexist actually, and it's not even the worst of it,” I tell her. “Back in the day, this rule meant the king was free to take as many wives as necessary to find one who would bear him a son.” I swallow down the rest of my thoughts on this particular matter. “In more recent years, it meant the crown would go to the firstborn son of the second son of the previous king, should the current king only produce daughters. If the second son also wound up being sonless, this same rule applied moving down from there.”

“Wouldn't it be easier to just let the daughters keep their names when they get married?” she asks, mockery distinctly present in her tone.

I snort. “So many things would be so much easier and less offensive, but that's not how the Westergaards prefer to operate.” I stretch out my legs and let my hands rest in my lap. Now that she knows the big secret, it's easy to surrender to the rest of the tale. “Outside of having to be the firstborn son, it is preferred but not required, said son is married by the time he takes the throne as king.”

“Increased chances of a next generation.” Greer nods. “Got it.”

“Ordinarily, my unmarried status, while obviously frowned upon, would not be enough to forfeit me the crown. However,” and this is where things get really disgusting, “because I am an unmarried man with a child out of wedlock to whom I share no biological connection and who, to top it off, is not a firstborn son – though this should be irrelevant, I'm told it's not – my eligibility to rule is being called into question. Especially since my younger brother *is* married. And his wife *is* pregnant. Supposedly with a boy, though no one has seen the sonogram.”

“That's insane.” Greer has reached the only natural conclusion. “Why should any of it matter?”

“Basically, because my stepmother will scratch and claw her way through any loophole she can find to make her son king,” I sneer. “But the bullshit version sounds more like, ‘Not only are you asking us to risk losing a direct descendant to inherit the crown, but you're also expecting this family to tarnish its well-preserved reputation all on account of your personal choices,’” I say, mimicking my grandmother's tone. “You may be royal by blood and name, but despite our every effort to groom and prepare you for your responsibilities to your family as well as your country, I'm afraid you've remained your mother's son, through and through.”

Greer's nose crinkles and her hand falls away from her mouth. "Has she met your mother? Or Chase? Because that is a damn compliment if I ever heard one, and I'm just not sure your grandmother's clear on that."

I laugh. It's the lightest I've felt since I walked in here. "I'm positive she's not, though I appreciate that you are."

She smiles softly, holding my gaze for a few seconds longer. Then, her brow furrows again and the smile turns to a frown. "That's why you're here to find Mo's biological father. To put you first in line again."

"It's not that simple." I cover my face with my hands, wishing not for the first time it was this easy to shut out the world on a more permanent basis. "If it were just a choice between Monroe and the crown, there'd be no choice to it. She's been my responsibility from the moment I said yes to a pregnant Riley, pleading with me to take her child and keep her safe. But she's been my daughter since the first night she came home with me and cried the second the nanny tried to take her from me. She's mine. I'm hers. And deep down, I think I always knew what Riley was really asking me when she brought me those guardianship papers. She knew she wasn't going to make it out of the abyss. She was too tired, too lost. And Monroe should have been her reason to fight, to keep living, but I think all she could see when she looked at her was another person she was going to fail." Every word feels like a knife through my heart. Not just the pain of losing her, or the pain of knowing Monroe will never know her own mother. Somehow, it feels like a betrayal to admit she died on a battleground of her own making.

Greer leans forward and takes my hand, holding it gently between hers. "What makes it complicated?"

"Linden." I swallow down the emotions still rising in my throat. "Before Monroe, Linden mattered more to me than anything." I'm not sure I even know how to explain it. "I spent my whole life preparing for the day I was old enough to go and meet my destiny. The fate that came with being born my father's son. I took it seriously, saw honor in it, and from the moment I was eighteen, I dedicated every waking second to learning all there was to know about my country. The government. The economy. The industries that thrived, the ones that didn't. Met the people. Heard their concerns, their needs and their dreams for our country." I stop to breathe and to remember. It's been over a decade, there's no way I could possibly relay to Greer during one conversation the impact my path has had on me. "If I believed my brother would do right by them, would reign with honor and consideration, ensuring a land my people can be proud of, feel safe in and live well in, I would step aside without hesitation. He's given me no reason to believe in him. On the contrary, he's happy to follow old patterns and outdated beliefs. The tried and true that only serves the privileged and leaves behind everyone else." I slow down, pausing to say the last of it, the words that continue to run in circles inside my own head, making it impossible to tune them out or ignore them or even hear them in a new way. "I can't be the man I wish to be, or honor my daughter as the father she deserves, if I don't honor the responsibility I was entrusted with. Her life. As well as the lives of every Linde I spent the last decade promising a life of servitude to. And all their daughters who deserve to grow up in a country where the firstborn daughter can be destined to be queen. And every child learns that royalty has nothing to do with blue blood and everything to do with a courageous, selfless heart."

Only when I'm done, do I realize how heated I got. I'm standing, pacing back and forth in front of the sofa, and judging from the two women standing two shelves down staring at me, my voice must have carried.

Greer looks thoughtful as she climbs to her feet as well. "What if you were married?"

“Huh?” It’s not the parting thought I expected to leave her with after everything I said. “I suppose it would level the playing field again. If I were married, no one could argue the likelihood of another heir, and being an unwed father clearly couldn’t be said of me anymore either.” It’s irrelevant though. “But my father retires in twenty-three days. I can’t exactly whip up a wife in three weeks.”

“No,” she agrees, a sly grin moving in over her mouth. “But you could hire one.”



CHAPTER NINE

GREER As soon as the words are out of my mouth, and I hear them out loud, I realize they're possibly the dumbest words ever spoken. But insane as it may be, it's the only way I can see for right to be restored where wrong is so freely running amok.

"How would I hire a wife?" Lachlan asks, clearly not sure whether to laugh at the idea or have hope in it.

"Well," I start, eyes rolling to the side. "You might not be able to hire a wife," I amend my former statement. "But you could hire an actress. Who could play your wife."

He chuckles, apparently opting to be amused by the sentiment. "That's very sweet, Greer."

"Not all that sweet," I tell him. "I'd expect to get paid. We could work it into the divorce settlement." Then it occurs to me their sexist ways might not be hip to the concept. "You can get divorced as King of Linden, right?" The royals in England don't seem to have an issue with it.

"Greer," he says, brows half furrowed as if he's not committed to being certain I'm the one who's confused here. "I can't just show up with a woman and claim she's my wife. They'd expect proof. There'd be a royal wedding." He looks like he has more to say but can't decide if it's necessary to keep going.

"I'm aware it wouldn't be simple," I tell him, making sure I have my sanest expression locked on my face and the calmest tone carrying my words at an even, steady pace. "But, it's not impossible. And if it is possible, which it is, then don't you owe it to Mo to at least explore the idea?"

His mouth opens, but nothing comes out. He shakes his head and begins to pace again, stopping a few steps in to start saying something only to wind up speechless a second time. By the third effort, words finally surface. "You'd have to move to Linden. For at least a month. Probably longer to finalize everything."

"Traveling for gigs is something I always have to be open to," I say matter of fact. "And the timeframe is always flexible. Sometimes a show runs longer than expected, other times it gets canceled before we make it to opening night. It's not anything I'm not already familiar with."

He gives up pacing and takes up roots in front of me. "What about nannying?"

"Nora always has an agency on standby for when I get a gig."

He nods. Another concern checked off his list, but I can't tell if I'm winning, or he is. We should both be, but it doesn't feel like we want the same thing yet. "What about the audition you just had? You were really excited about doing that play."

I shrug. "I doubt I even get a part."

He makes a face. "Now's not the time to tell me you're a horrible actress."

"I'm spectacular," I inform him with flair. "but they were looking for a blonde with a more traditional Cinderella look, which I clearly don't have." I won't go into the many ways in which the director verbalized his ignorance and discrimination. Instead, I'm focusing on the impact I could actually have by taking this role. As fake queen of Linden. If showing up for even a couple of months clears the path for Mo to be queen one day in a country that currently has its head so far up its ass it's facing the past instead of the future and can't even tell the difference, I'll have made a greater impact than any other part will likely ever offer me. Not to mention, Mo gets to grow up with her dad.

"You're serious."

"I am." I check in with myself one last time, just to be sure. "Let me do this. Let me help you keep your daughter and your crown." Possibly the strangest sentence I've ever spoken, and I was part of an Improv group for three years.

He starts to nod, then slows the gesture, eyes taking me in as if he's seeing me in a new light. Only takes me a second to catch up to his next concern.

"I can look the part," I assure him. "I'll go see my girl, Maci, tomorrow. She'll tame the mane and turn it into something more conservative."

He still doesn't talk, but his eyes move up my arm and catch on my collarbone and the tattoos in both places, probably wondering where else I'm marked with permanent ink.

"Everything can be covered," I promise. "Trust me. I'm a chameleon. Just tell me how you envision your future queen to look and by the end of the week, that's who I'll be."

If I meant that to be comforting, and I did, it doesn't seem to have the desired effect. Now he's gone from concerned to dissatisfied.

"I don't want you to have to change anything," he mutters quietly, gaze cast down at his feet.

"I appreciate that." I move in a step closer, peering up at him to meet his eyes. "But I will. So that your stepmother runs out of loopholes. And so that someday, when you find your real queen, she won't have to. And neither will Mo. Because we're going to go in, play by the rules, win and bam – break the game." I grin, hoping it will nudge him to smile as well.

"Break the game," he says, as if he's trying out the words for himself. "I like that."

"So, do we have a deal?"

Finally, his head shakes up and down in a committed yes. "We have a deal." His hand moves out in front of him, though it doesn't go far because I'm still standing inside his circle of personal space. Ordinarily, I'd find it uncomfortable, being this close to someone, but Lachlan's space doesn't make me feel crowded. It makes me feel...home.

As soon as the word flashes in my mind, I step back, removing myself from his bubble. I'm quick enough to extend my hand and shake on our arrangement to cover the awkward motion, but it's not as easy to recover my previous smile. So, I start talking. "Perfect. Well, if we're getting married, I suppose you better meet my dad, AKA, Papa Reads"

I expect him to jump back in a panic this time, but he surprises me. "Papa Reads?"

"One of the kids started calling him that way back in the day. It was meant more like a request, like Papa reads?" I giggle remembering. "Just kind of stuck."

"I like it. Papa Reads." His grip remains steady on my hand and he starts walking, taking me along with him. "Alright, let's do it."

He gets to the end of the aisle and stops, turning over his shoulder to look to me for further instructions.

"Go right," I tell him, pointing with my free hand. "All the way to the back."

He does as told and next thing I know, we're strolling into the children's corner hand in hand. I can't dwell on it though, because the sight that greets us is more than my heart can hold for the moment.

My dad is sitting in the rocking chair, perfectly content, two sleeping beauties curled up in his lap, one in each arm.

"I don't think they're ready for Shakespeare yet," my dad says in a hushed voice, gently chuckling as he does.

"Still using that trick at naptime, huh?" I whisper, remembering all too well the years he put me to sleep that way. "Where's Aiden?"

My dad doesn't use words to answer this time. Just tips his head slightly left to the bean bag chair covered nearly completely by the quilt I was using earlier. If it weren't for the patch of brown hair poking out, I'd have missed him curled up under it.

Speaking of missing things, judging by the sly look in my father's eyes, the fact Lachlan is still holding my hand hasn't gone unnoticed by him.

"I'd shake your hand and introduce myself, but it seems we both have our hands full at the moment," he says still whispering, sly look reaching from his eyes down to his mouth now.

It's almost as if Lachlan forgot he was holding onto me. His gaze drops to his side and our intertwined fingers, palms melded to each other perfectly. I don't allow myself to look, just revel in the feeling of it, one I haven't felt in a long time. Then, the feeling passes. His hand slides from mine and he takes a step forward, this time moving without me.

"Lachlan. It's a pleasure to meet you," Lachlan says quietly, waving his hand awkwardly in lieu of a proper handshake. "Thank you so much for looking after my daughter. The fact she fell asleep in your arms, says more about you than you can imagine."

My father's smile shifts from sly to soft, and for a second, I think maybe he's getting the wrong idea about things.

"He's Chase's brother," I blurt out, before my father can say anything that might imply he's having fatherly feelings similar to Lachlan's at the sight of my holding his hand.

My dad grins. "I know."

I suppose he would. I did mention he was coming by. And that Mo was Chase's niece. "Want us to take the baby load?" I ask, changing the topic entirely.

"If you think you can move them from my lap to the nap mat without waking them."

Lachlan's brow scrunches up slightly. "Nap mat?"

I point at the foam mats laid out in the shape of a giant caterpillar in front of the corner windows. "They're for tummy time and such, but the kids nap on them all the time when we come here," I explain, already moving to scoop Liz out of my father's embrace. We do this often enough that we have it down to a science now. His arm moves with her until she's completely flush against my chest, never breaking from the comforts of body heat in the transition. Getting her down onto the mat is more of the same, except we trade the coziness of warm skin for a fleece blanket I grab from the basket in passing.

I'm just getting her settled when Lachlan shows up next to me, going through similar motions with Mo. Before long, both girls are successfully relocated and still blissfully lost in dreamland.

"Coffee?" my dad offers when we return to find an empty rocking chair still rocking in his wake. I turn toward his voice and am pleased to see him walking toward us from the coffee counter in the opposite corner, two mugs in hand.

"Always." I smile, hurrying to meet him halfway.

"Thank you," Lachlan says, catching up half a second later to take the second cup from my father. "This is perfect."

"You haven't even tried it," I muse, watching him cradle the mug in his hands and appreciating the fact he savors the moment before he has his first sip same as I do.

"I know." He smirks. It's silly and entirely too adorable for my mental wellbeing. "But I'm sure it will be. Because all of this is." His eyes travel around the store until they come back around to me and my dad. "This store. The kids sound asleep in this cozy place. You. Your dad. Our new plan." He winks. "All perfect."

My dad laughs, turning back toward the coffee counter and the third cup he left behind there. “There’s a plan?” he asks, his back still to us. “Involving my daughter and a man?”

“Don’t get excited,” I tell him. “It’s a plan to work together.”

I can see him nodding as he stirs sugar into his coffee. “Of course. That sounds more like you.”

Lachlan makes a weird face, but I push past it and pretend I don’t notice. “Thing is, I’m going to be gone for a couple of months.”

My father reaches for the creamer. “So, this is a nannying job?”

I shake my head, realizing after the fact, he can’t even see me do it. “No, it’s an acting job.”

My dad turns around, moving slowly and careful not to spill. He’s great at fixing coffees for others, but his own he always fills to full. “What sort of acting job?” I can’t tell if he’s curious or suspicious now.

“You’ll like this,” I tell him, “it’s like something straight off one of your shelves in here.”

“Oh, yeah?” His left brow arches, clearly intrigued.

Meanwhile, Lachlan seems just as interested in hearing me spell the gig out for my dad. “I can’t wait to hear this.” He chuckles quietly, raising his cup to his mouth again. I can’t help but feel it’s an intentional move depriving me of the opportunity to tell him to shove it while I’m selling my dad on the acting gig that could easily sound like a ploy to commit fraud if not told properly. Not that my father won’t be able to see through whatever fictional veil I attempt to drape over the matter. Still, I’d like to maintain some degree of respectability here, and Lachlan making fun of me right out the gate, isn’t helping.

“Imagine a prince,” I say dramatically, waving my hand in a wide arc through the air as if I’m setting the scene. “Prince Lachlan of Linden.”

Lachlan snorts.

My dad laughs.

I’m off to a rocky start, but I press on. “The prince, of course, is heir to the throne. Or, he would be, if it weren’t for his evil stepmother trying to steal his birthright out from under him to secure the crown for her own son...the spare.” I flash my eyes as I hiss the words. “Now, the only way Prince Lachlan can save his kingdom from the greedy, power hungry clutches of his step-monster, is to sacrifice his only child or,” I pause for effect, and also to make the following sentence the obvious solution...and not a ploy to commit fraud, “marry.”

“Ah,” my father says, understanding but playing along. “But how will he meet his future wife in the nick of time? A ball?”

“A bookstore.” I smirk. “A magic bookstore run by a fairy godfather who bestows the desperate prince his only daughter to take as his wife.”

My father’s eyes widen a bit and I have to give myself a mental pat on the back for delivering a plot twist even he didn’t see coming. “The spell won’t last forever,” he says slowly, though I can hear the hint of a question in his tone.

“Only until midnight on the final day of the second month,” I finish. “Then, the spell will be broken, the young maiden returned home, and the prince unmarried once more. All will be as it was, but for three significant differences. The crown will be his. The kingdom safe. And his daughter, forever, at his side.”

No one says anything for several seconds after I finish talking.

When the silence drags on too long to be bearable, Lachlan is the first to break it.

“Fairy tales aside,” he pauses, clearing his throat and looking about a hundred times more uncomfortable than he did when he had to tell me what he’s about to tell my father, “I really am a

prince. And -” he shakes his head, chuckling, though I sense it’s more in disbelief than amusement. “Actually, I’m not sure there was any part of that story that wasn’t true. Though even I’ve never heard it put quite in those words.”

“You’re a prince.” My father’s lack of emotion suggests he’s still grappling with the whole concept.

“Prince Lachlan of Linden,” I remind him. “It was right there at the beginning of my story. I have to tell you, I thought it’d be a stronger opening. The kind that hooks you right from the start, not the sort you skim over and forget about.”

“Oh, I was hooked,” my father assures me. “I just didn’t realize it was more documentary than fiction.” He turns back to Lachlan. “Linden. You’re famous for your yarn.”

Lachlan laughs in surprise. “Yes. As a matter of fact, we are.”

“That’s a weird thing to know about a place, Dad,” I mumble, breaking away from our pack to refill my cup. “It’s also a weird thing to be famous for. When I’m queen, that’s the first thing I’m changing.”



LACHLAN

THE LONGER WE STAY here, chatting with Greer’s dad (Morton, I finally asked), the less crazy and impossible our plan feels. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking, a desperate attachment to this glimmer of hope I’m being given by her, or maybe it’s because of how easy I’m finding it all to believe myself. The more we talk about our impending nuptials the less it feels like we’re playing pretend. There’s just something about being here, with her, with all of them, that feels natural.

“What’s the backstory of this tale then?” Morton asks, settling back into the rocking chair, this time sans two sleeping beauties putting his arms and legs to sleep. “You’re not going to have a formal ‘find a wife’ ball, I assume, but are you still running with the love at first sight trope?”

Greer, now sitting on a large pillow on the floor with her second cup of coffee, legs crossed like she’s about to go into deep meditation, makes a very non-Zen face at the suggestion. “Absolutely not. I thought he was a demon trying to rob me of my soul and coffee first time we met.”

I’m the only one still standing, mostly because I can’t decide between the couch which I could easily get up and down from, or the bean bag chair I want to sit in but definitely can’t get in and out of with the grace befitting of a prince. Every other piece of furniture in the children’s corner of the store is too small for me to sit in without having it be crushed by my weight or blasted to bits from the size of my frame. So, I stand. And return the grimace Greer just shot me. “A demon? How exactly did I look like a demon the first time we met?”

She shrugs and then looks like she’s trying to remember exactly what triggered this demon image. The longer she sits in silence, rummaging through her thoughts, the more I’m inclined to think she’s not conjuring up the demon-like imagery she was expecting. I was freshly showered and wearing nothing but a towel the first time we met. Not the ideal first impression, but I’ve seen enough headlines touting me as one of the most desired bachelors alive, to surmise it’s not completely unpleasing and highly unlikely demon-like.

“Maybe it wasn’t so much first ‘sight’ demon as it was first ‘listen’ demon,” she concedes after several drawn out moments of contemplation. “You have a very evil sounding hiss when you’re afraid someone’s going to wake your baby.”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is protective.” I start to lower myself to the bean bag. If I’m coming across as a creature of darkness on regular occasion, I’m probably overthinking my efforts to be as dignified as possible here. “Threatening, maybe. But evil?”

“My morning coffee, and thus the wellbeing of my soul, felt very much in jeopardy,” she counters. “That doesn’t sound evil to you?”

I sigh, opting for surrender on this one. “Fine. Your first impression of me did not produce a love at first sight sort of reaction.”

“Did yours?” she asks, eyes gleaming with a sudden onset of intense curiosity.

“Did my what?”

“Did your first impression of me produce a love at first sight sort of reaction?” she repeats the entire phrase back to me.

“Did my first impression of you busting into the apartment uninvited to steal half and half from my brother’s fridge while shouting loud enough to wake my sleeping baby produce a love at first sight sort of reaction?” I spell out my side of said encounter. “No.”

Morton laughs quietly. “I’m almost sorry you two are taking this show out of the country.” He rests his now nearly empty cup on his knee. “Since you’ve both ruled out love at first sight, where does that leave you?”

Greer taps the side of her mug with her fingernails and starts to chew on her bottom lip, something I’m starting to learn is part of her ‘thinking face’.

“You’re a longtime friend of the family,” I say when she can’t seem to come up with anything. “I think we can skim over the fact we never met before now and just focus on the part where you’ve always been there, in the background, only this trip I finally took notice.”

Her brow furrows and her lip pops out from under her teeth to land in a sour pout. “Why am I the one who’s only just now being noticed? Maybe I’m the one that’s been ignoring *you* all these years.”

“You can’t have been ignoring me all these years,” I say flatly.

“Why not?”

“Because,” I explain matter of fact, “I’m a prince. No one ignores a prince.” Then I smirk. “And also, because this is my fairy tale.”



CHAPTER TEN

REER

G The kids wake up from their naps before we can iron out the who-ignored-who issue of our backstory. I'm pretty sure Lachlan thinks he closed the argument, but he'll learn soon enough I never give in so easily, even if I do get distracted mid-argument. I remember. I come back to finish.

"You sure you know what you're doing there?" Dad asks as I'm strapping Liz back into the stroller, preparing for our walk back home. Lachlan and Mo left a little earlier having farther to go.

"I've only strapped a kid in and out of this thing about a million times, Dad. I'm quite sure I have it figured out." I check the strap one more time to make sure it's properly clicked into place. Liz has been getting awfully squirmy in there as of late. Especially when she's already had a good rest and needs to burn off some energy. They had some time to run around the store, but not nearly enough.

"I don't mean the stroller, princess," he muses.

"I suddenly have very mixed feelings about being called that," I tell him, twisting up my mouth while I decide how much I want to read into the current state of my life and the nickname I've had since I was two and fell in love with my first fairy tale. I'm sure it's not a sign. Or fate. Or anything even remotely as ridiculous as every delusional thought trying to take root inside my brain at this very moment. "And yes, I'm sure I know what I'm doing with the whole Lachlan thing, too." I shrug, trying to minimize the scenario in which I'm about to marry a prince, a very lovely prince I happen to find increasingly attractive the longer I'm around him - which I likely will be a lot once I'm married to him - all of which I'm deeming an acting gig and nothing more.

My dad nods, but he doesn't put his response into actual words, leaving me to guess at whether he agrees with my assessment of my own ability to separate my emotions from my work or is merely agreeing to disagree.

I decide to go with option number one on this one. I have too many things already jumbling around in here, I don't have time or energy to sort through the various interpretations of my father's nod.

"You'll come see me before you hop on any planes?" he asks, walking me to the door.

"Of course," I promise, smacking a loud kiss on his cheek before we head out.

From here, everything passes in a routinely blur. Home. More kids. Dinner. Nora. And with her, the end of my workday.

"Is there still food?" I call out even as I'm walking into the apartment across from mine. I didn't even bother to go home first, I already know we have nothing to eat there. Or at least nothing that's ready for consumption, no cooking or prep work required.

"I don't know," Chase says. "Is this really the sort of wife you want? One who can't even cook?" This is when I notice he's not talking to me. And also, when I notice Lachlan already spilled the beans on our big fake wedding plans.

"Why are you telling him I can't cook?" I ask, making a beeline for the kitchen table and the stacks of pizza boxes sitting there practically screaming my name. Well, mine and Mal's apparently. She's already at the table, hogging an entire Hawaiian all to herself. "I wasn't going to reveal that until after we were married. You know, give him proper grounds for divorce." I cast a disgusted glance at Mal and her pineapple and ham abomination. "I don't know why you're acting like anyone else is coming for that."

"You think I'd divorce you over your lacking cooking skills?" Lachlan asks from his seat over on the couch where him, Abbas and Chase are all finishing up what looks like a pizza that had something

out of every stall on Old McDonald's farm on it.

"You could be that sexist. Your country certainly is," I retort. "Abbas, I'm telling your mom you ate Wilbur."

Abbas picks a piece of bacon from the box and returns the threat, "Then I'm telling all of Linden you're a fake bride."

Meanwhile, Lachlan just shrugs. "Even if I was as sexist as my country, we have a chef and full kitchen staff at the castle. We could stay married for the rest of our lives and I'd never know if you could cook or not."

Abbas stops his search for bacon. "Can I be your fake wife?"

"Can we stop making jokes about this for a minute?" Mal demands loudly, startling all of us, except Mo who's too zoned into some kid's show on the television to hear anything else. "This is serious. And frankly, I'm not sure I'm okay with it."

I pick at the slice of tomato that landed on the front of my shirt when I dropped the front half of my pizza, thanks to Mal's outburst, and the point flopped down short of reaching my mouth, flinging toppings at my chest instead. "I think I appreciate that," I start, investigating the tomato for lint and things before eating it. "But what about this are you not okay with?"

Her eyes narrow. "Mostly things I don't think you want me to say in front of boys but which I will if you feign ignorance moving forward."

I won't feign ignorance. I know what she's talking about. "Any other things?"

"No, wait," Lachlan interrupts. "I want to know the mostly things, too."

"They don't have anything to do with you," I tell him, sounding snottier than I intended.

"How do you know?"

"Because they're best girlfriend concerns, and you're neither her best friend nor a girl." I raise my brows daring him to make a comeback.

He doesn't. Instead, he turns to Chase. "Do you know what Mallory is talking about?"

Chase only just took a giant bite, so he can nod before he can answer. "Oh, yeah."

Lachlan looks back at me, crossing his arms and smirking triumphantly. "Go ahead. Continue with the other things."

"No, don't," Abbas pipes up again, wagging his finger at Mal to keep her mouth shut. "If you let them go through with this insanity, we all get a free vacation out of it."

She makes a face. "You need a free vacation so bad you're willing to let one of your best friends make what could potentially be the biggest mistake of her life?"

Abbas looks almost sad. "He lives in a castle. When are we ever going to get to stay in one of those again?"

Chase shrugs. "You can just come with me next time I go visit."

Abbas shakes his head. "Not the same. I want the wedding. Let me know when this goes to a vote."

Lachlan's expression takes a turn toward bewildered. "There's not going to be a vote."

"Oh, there's always a vote," Mal informs him in her scary voice. Usually, only Abbas and Cheese are subjected to it but we're all familiar with it thanks to their talents for bringing the dark side out of her while in the presence of an audience.

Chase and I exchange a glance, silently determining which one of us is filling in his brother on the insane but set rules of our small but chaotic community between two apartments. Chase rolls his eyes, accepting his duties, and sighs. Meanwhile, I settle in on the backrest of the couch, perfectly located between the storytelling about to take place and the pizza I'm going to want another slice of.

“Six and a half years ago,” he starts, and I can tell he’s already tempted to roll his eyes again. It’s not a story I would want to tell anyone outside the circle either. I don’t even want to have to repeat it to myself, it’s that dumb. But years later, I also can’t deny it’s been effective. “All four of us made some really bad decisions all over the course of the same week.” He pulls the last slice from the ravaged box before he goes on. “Abbas decided to sleep with this chick he met at an after-work thing. Mal agreed to dog-sit her ex-boyfriend’s dog. Greer’s stylist friend moved, leaving her to conclude it was time for an at home dye job. And me? I allowed myself to get roped into a relationship with a crazy person.”

It was a bad week.

“So, you all made some bad choices and decided you’d be better off letting other people who make equally bad choices decide for you?” Lachlan concludes skeptically.

“Not exactly.” But kind of. Chase takes a deep breath and proceeds to break it down for him another level. “It wasn’t just that we made bad choices. It was that we all collectively suffered from each of our individual bad choices. Abbas’s chick ended up being the wife of his firm’s client. Thankfully, the client never found out, but the chick went batshit crazy after their hook up, calling and showing up at all hours of the day and night, crying and screaming and threatening to tell her husband unless Abbas gave her what she wanted.”

Lachlan frowns. “Which was?”

“More Abbas,” Abbas says like it’s obvious.

Chase moves on before Lachlan can request more clarification or make snide comments Abbas won’t appreciate. “Mal’s guilt over dumping Travis wound up costing all of us when she let his pug Nancy come stay for three days. Dog peed everywhere. And I do mean everywhere. Months went by and we still found dried stains of urine in places you wouldn’t think a pug could squat. But Nancy, she had a gift. She also had teeth and a serious oral fixation. Everyone lost at least one pair of shoes that week.”

Lachlan’s mouth sways from confused to disgusted and his eyes get narrower like they’re trying to unsee the picture Chase is so vividly painting with his words.

“Greer’s hair fiasco was only slightly less destructive. Well, if you don’t count the destruction that took place on her.”

I did. I definitely counted it. Entire chunks of hair fell out or broke off. It was devastating. And the last time I ever attempted my own bleach job. Six and a half years later, and I’m still cautiously stroking my strands at the memory.

“But even with the damage mostly contained,” Chase carries on unbothered by my traumatic flashbacks, “she still managed to destroy their bathmat and left a big old bleach mark on our sofa when she accidentally leaned back with all that shit still in her hair.” He lifts the large throw pillow nestled beside him to reveal the damage. “Not to mention, she turned all of our showers pink for months after when she tried to save what was left of her hair by cutting it into spikes and dying it fuchsia.”

Lachlan nods, casting a casual but obvious glance in my direction and the vibrant teal streaked through my fully recovered mane. “And your monumental error that week?” He sounds almost afraid to ask now. I have to commend him for his dedication to seeing things through, even when they’re uncomfortable and he’s clearly going to come out on the losing end of it when all is said and done.

“Colt,” Chase says, a tormented twist shaping his mouth.

“Like a horse?”

“Like a cowboy.” The one and only Chase ever dated. “Met him at the farmer’s market. He was charming and sweet and had that twang and the hat.” Chase shrugs regretfully. “I think I knew deep down it was a bad idea, but I just couldn’t help myself.”

Lachlan’s brow crinkles and he props one elbow onto his knee, hand moving first toward his face then stopping short to point at his brother. “Is this the guy that kidnapped you for five days?”

“Yes!” Mallory calls out from across the room where she’s still sitting at the kitchen table. “Total psycho. Wouldn’t let him leave. Not that he held him at gun point or anything, but still, Chase called us in tears one night and it took an extravagant Greer scheme and all three of us to get him out.”

Lachlan looks like he can’t tell if he should laugh or be upset by this. Then, it’s like his mind catches on something else she said and his eyes land on me, a silent question forming in them.

“I’m not a frequent schemer,” I assure him. “I just happen to have an imagination favorable to conjuring schemes when necessary.”

“It’s true,” Abbas adds. “We think it has to do with growing up in a bookstore surrounded by fiction. Sometimes she can’t tell the difference between what’s realistic and what’s not, which can be annoying in day-to-day life, but really comes in handy in the scheme of scheming.”

“The point is,” Mallory says loudly, pushing out her chair and standing from the table to walk toward us. “The Sunday which followed each of our individual travesties, we made a pact. In this living room. At that coffee table. There was tequila. And a bowl of raw cookie dough. Words were spoken. Blood was spilled. Vows were made. And now, *we vote*.”



LACHLAN

I TAKE MY TIME TO MAKE eye contact with every single person in the room, minus Monroe, who’s oblivious to the state of things in this apartment right now. No one cracks. No smile. No hint of amusement flickering in anyone’s eyes.

“You’re serious,” I say, one final request for clarification. “You all get a vote on whether or not Greer and I go through with our plan.”

“Yes,” Mallory confirms, moving around the sofa to have a seat on the coffee table, directly across from me. “We all get a vote. And I vote no.”

“You can’t vote yet,” Greer interjects. “We haven’t presented our case.”

She shrugs. “Lachlan did.”

“But I didn’t get to share my side. And mine is the choice we’re voting on. Not Lachlan’s. He’s not part of the pact,” she reasons. If reasoning can still be used in the context of this conversation.

“She’s right,” Abbas jumps in, quick to defend his path to a free vacation and chance at living the royal life.

“I don’t think it matters,” Chase says calmly, contemplating the last of his pizza. He’s down to the crust and he’s never been a fan. “I’m pretty sure we’re going to outvote Mal anyway.”

“Nothing is official until it’s official,” Mallory insists, eyes cast into narrow slits so I can barely see her pupils in anymore. “And it won’t be official until tomorrow morning. We vote over breakfast.”

“Deal.” Greer jumps off the back of the couch and moseys back to the kitchen table. “Now can we please start talking about something else?”

“I can’t,” Mallory says, a rushed look at her watch. “I have to run down to the basement and throw in a load of laundry before it gets too late.”

“Oh.” Abbas stands up from the recliner. “That reminds me. I’m out of clean socks.”

Chase tosses the strip of crust into the empty box, wiping his hands on the last napkin before tossing it into the box as well. “You can borrow a pair of mine if you don’t want to do laundry tonight.”

Abbas looks oddly panicked by the offer. “No. It’s fine. I don’t mind.” When he doesn’t seem satisfied with his own answer he adds, “I need underwear too. Can’t borrow that.”

Chase scowls. “No, you can’t.”

Next thing, Mallory is rushing over to her place while Abbas darts off down the hall, both suddenly very motivated to get to the laundry room downstairs.

“Is there only one washer?” I ask Greer when I join her in the kitchen to throw away the remainders of our boys’ dinner devoured in the living room.

“Nope. There are ten. And ten dryers.” She grins, like there’s more that she’s not saying.

“Is this not about doing laundry?” I lean back against the counter, folding my arms loosely over my chest and crossing one ankle over the other.

“What else would it be about?” Chase asks, wandering over from the living area to join us.

Before Greer can answer, Abbas is zipping past, making a beeline for the exit, giant hamper bag in hand and gesturing a hasty wave with the other before disappearing behind a slamming door.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Greer smirks wickedly. “But I can think of only one thing Abbas ever runs from the apartment for.”

Chase snorts. “Yeah. Sex.” Then his eyes widen, and he starts to cough like he just choked on his own spit. “Holy shit!”

“Wait.” I’m still piecing things together here. “Are you saying...? Abbas and Mallory? Really?” I barely know Mallory, but I’ve known Abbas for years. He wouldn’t casually hook up with her, she matters to him. Which means, she matters to him a lot if there’s sex involved.

“Let’s just say, Mal will be voting in our favor tomorrow morning,” she says slyly.

“But also, let’s say more,” Chase presses, mouth hanging open. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he started drooling here shortly. “How do you know? Did you catch them? Wait, do you honestly know or are you guessing? Drawing semi-educated conclusions? How certain are you of this knowledge you claim to have?”

“Very certain.” She nods slowly. “My information came straight from the source.”

“Mallory,” I assume.

She grins. “Abbas.” Then she turns unexpectedly serious, directing all her attention at Chase. “And I’m only telling you because I’m going to be gone and you’re going to have to do all the responsible meddling necessary to see them through this messy and potentially damaging turn in their relationship.”

Chase whines audibly, a sound I’ve been listening to since he was four and was first confronted with Brussels sprouts. I remember sneaking them off his plate from every meal moving forward just to not have to hear it. I don’t find it any less annoying now. Maybe I find it more annoying. A grown man shouldn’t whine like that. “I don’t want to be in charge of their happiness.” He winces like he’s in physical pain over this. “You know they’re both terrible at being happy.”

“Abbas is like the happiest dude I know,” I point out, clearly not following what the issue is here.

“No,” my brother insists. “Abbas is the *most carefree* dude you know. There’s a difference.”

“There is?” I’m pretty sure if I were carefree, I’d be pretty damn happy.

“He’s not carefree because he doesn’t have a care in the world,” Greer explains. “He’s carefree because he chooses not to give a shit. And you can’t be happy while not giving a shit. Being happy

involves feelings. Not giving a shit generally means you're avoiding those."

"Just break it down for me," Chase pushes past the hiccup I caused by not following along with their usual insanity. "Where are we at with this disaster? Why did he come to you? She's too invested? He's afraid of hurting her? What?"

Greer pushes the lid back down on the open pizza box in front of her. She's been eyeing the last slice for the last several minutes and apparently just decided against it. "Why do you just assume the unrequited love is coming from Mal?"

He shrugs, spinning the same box around to face him, popping it open and taking the slice for himself. "Because we all know she's been in love with him since the day you guys moved in and he was kind enough to help her put her stupid bed together." Knowing Abbas this act of kindness was undoubtedly motivated by thoughts of spending time in it once he was done. Clearly, that didn't go as planned. Or, at least not in the expected timeframe.

"Yeah, they both interpreted that gesture *really* differently," Greer says brows climbing her forehead.

"Perspective matters." Chase's mouth is so full it's making his words muffled, but I'm pretty sure I hear him right. Thankfully, he gulps down most of it before he goes on, "So is it Mal? Is she taking an Abbas fling and trying to turn it into a romance of epic proportions?"

"No." She shakes her head. "Mallory is playing it cool. Abbas is the one trying to get out of an Abbas fling and into a romance of epic proportions."

"That's unexpected." So much so, he pulls out a chair and flops down into it. "Greer," he says, sounding more serious than I would deem warranted given the context of this conversation, "I think we both know I'm not equipped to handle this."

"You deal with teenagers and their drama all day long," she counters, less serious, thank God. "Mallory and Abbas is just more of the same." Then she casually moseys her way to the fridge, opens the freezer, takes out a carton of ice cream, and heads for the door like she didn't just commit dessert theft. "Also, I'm going to do the groundwork with Mallory before I leave."

"Is that why you're taking my cookies and cream?" Chase points at the frosty carton in her hand, just in case she wasn't aware we noticed she took it. "To soften her up and get her talking?"

"No." She swings the door open and starts to go through. "I just wanted ice cream." Then the door slams shut, and she's gone. And so is dessert.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

REER

G “Have fun doing laundry with Abbas?” I ask from my seat at the breakfast bar as soon as Mallory comes strolling in through the front door. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is a mess, and even while she’s hunched over pretending like her wicker hamper is heavy with clean clothes, I happen to know it’s not.

“As fun as laundry can be,” she says, sounding especially unimpressed with the chore.

“Looks like you got quite the workout,” I motion with my spoon at her disheveled appearance before directing it back to the ice cream carton for another bite. I was hoping she’d show back up while I was still enjoying dessert. I like a little entertainment with my sweets.

“Lugging this thing up and down the stairs, yes,” she says, and I can feel my eyes widen as I try to stifle my amusement.

“Yeah.” I nod a few more times, pretending to be especially focused on my ice cream. “I can only imagine how heavy it must have been.” I reach down at my side and grab the strings of her liner sac containing all her dirty clothes. “Especially since you left all the hamper’s contents on your bed.”

She drops the basket, which bounces a little upon landing given the lack of weight. “How long have you known?”

“Since three days ago when Abbas paid me a visit at work to bring me coffee and cookies and tell me how he caught feelings after sleeping with you, but you didn’t seem to be afflicted in the same way. Which, I should tell you, left him quite distressed.” I flip my spoon over and slide it over my tongue, sucking the gob of ice cream off. “Distressed enough to come see me at work and bring me coffee and cookies,” I reiterate his fragile frame of mind before I pause and let her formulate a response.

“Good.” She abandons her empty hamper and joins me at the breakfast bar, grabbing a spoon from the dishrack on her way over.

“Good? That’s all you’re going to give me?” Just to be clear about my refusal to accept her limited offering, I retract the ice cream carton until it’s completely out of her reach. “You made a shitshow out of voting against my fake marriage to the prince on account of how wholly self-destructive you deem the act, and yet, here you are, secretly sleeping with the manwhore who holds your heart in his teeth, and all you come to the table with is a spoon and *good*?”

Mal bites down on her lip, eyes narrowing as they zero in on the ice cream carton, likely calculating the effort required to seize it and render me helpless to stop her and whether it would be easier to just give in and tell me what I want to know, which I’m hoping she’s leaning toward. Even when surrender is imminent, Mal likes to put up a good front, make you worry for a second that she’s precisely as crazy as she says she is.

Eight years in, I’ve determined she’s only about seventy-three percent there. Still, it’s plenty crazy and thus, one must always consider the possibility of a brawl over ice cream, especially when vulnerability is the alternative.

“How much ice cream is left in that carton?” she asks, trying to see from where she’s sitting, but the angle isn’t favorable for dependable results.

“About three quarters of it.”

She mulls it over. “If I tell you all mine, you tell me all yours.”

I figured we were headed here. “We both talk until the ice cream is gone or one of us pukes.”

“Deal.”

I push the carton between us. “Still in love with him?” I get straight to the point. I find it’s easier to piece together the details after you establish the main truth of it all.

Mallory’s mouth is full, but she nods and makes a sound that’s similar to ‘uh-huh’. She swallows, pointing her spoon at me. “Falling for him?”

My first instinct is to say no. No is usually the right answer here. Usually. But nothing about Lachlan is remotely usual. “Possibly.” Saying the word out loud is enough to make me feel nauseous in a way that has nothing to do with eating too much ice cream. “Ever plan on telling him?”

“Doubtful.” She pokes around the carton trying to get a chunk of cookie. “You?”

“Highly unlikely.”

She finally gets the perfect bite she’s been digging for. “So, are we done here?”

I laugh. “If only it were that easy.”

Careful not to lose anything, Mallory navigates the spoon into her mouth. For a long moment, she savors the ideal combination of cream and cookie. Then, she sighs. “Let’s forget for a moment how dumb I’m being,” she starts, but I cut in before she can keep going.

“Just to clarify, which part is the being dumb part? The sleeping with the guy you have feelings for who never sleeps with anyone he has feelings for? Or the not admitting you have feelings for the guy you have feelings for who has feelings for you even though he never has feelings for anyone. And sleeps with everyone. Until now. That he’s only sleeping with you. A lot. And has feelings. A lot of them. And all for you.”

She rolls her eyes. “I was going to go with the first one, but that’s clearly not the direction you’re leaning in.” She jabs her spoon at the ice cream like she’s making a statement, but it’s already too soft to stand up to a jab, so the statement gets a little muddled. Or it would, if I didn’t know her well enough to interpret every gesture, successfully executed or not. “Now that we’ve clarified, can I go on with what I was saying?”

I gently scoop another spoonful as any civilized person would who doesn’t have to pummel their way through layers of rage every time they’re asked to confront their feelings. “Absolutely. Please, do continue.” I wave my spoon for her to go on and then suck it clean again. This part is less civilized.

“As I was saying,” she presses her mouth together in a stern line, almost daring me to interrupt again. I would, but my mouth is still full, so I let this one slide. “My poor romantic choices aside, you’re kind of on the verge of blowing up your life a little, and frankly, I’m a lotta scared for you.”

“Are you sure genius level brains make use of the phrase, ‘I’m a lotta’?”

She scowls and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if she’s imagining flinging ice cream at my face right now. “Don’t deflect. It’s tacky and rude among best friends.”

I set my spoon down. If I’m really going to go down this road, my stomach can’t handle anymore sugar in it. “Fine. I’ll be the first to get all raw and real and shit.”

“I knew you would.” She smirks. “You’re a good friend like that.”

I lick my lip, then bite it, then run my tongue over it all over again. Saying certain things out loud is harder than I thought it would be. Or maybe it’s not saying them out loud as much as I’m realizing not everything I want to say is completely true. Not anymore. So, I can’t say them. Only now I don’t know what words will come out in their place.

“My feelings for Lachlan have definitely evolved past the whole initial, profoundly superficial, attraction,” I say, peeling at a sticker on the side of the ice cream carton. Apparently, there was a two for one special. Only I didn’t see two cartons of ice cream in Chase’s freezer. Not important. “But I

think that's pretty natural given the amount of time we've spent together and the fact he went from stranger to friend over the last few days."

"So, you're saying your feelings have evolved to a more platonic place?"

I don't even have to look at her to know the face she's making. It's all skeptics and sarcasm between her eyes and mouth over there.

"I'm saying, my feelings have evolved. That's all. Not in any particular direction. They just have more depth now. I care more than I did on Sunday. But I don't care more in a way that means more than not caring meant before. I just...care more." I pull at the sticker but only half of it comes off. I'm almost grateful. Now I can obsess about getting the rest of it without having to delve too deeply into whatever comes out of my mouth moving forward.

"You care more." It's like she's trying the words out for herself. To see if they feel different than they sound. "You care more. Fine. Do you still find him attractive?"

It's enough to make me look away from my sticker project and stare at her. "Really? You've seen him, right? In a towel? In fitted shirts and tailored pants? Holding a baby?"

She cocks a cynical brow. "You know that baby thing doesn't work on all of us."

"Well, it's like hot guy crack in my book. So, yes, I still find him attractive." I return my attention to the sticker. "But in an objective way."

"Like you're just objectifying him?"

"No. Like I can be objective about the fact that I find him attractive because I find men holding babies attractive. It's separate from my feelings for him." It's what I've been telling myself, silently, inside my head, since I met him. But hearing it out loud is better. It sounds right. True. Yes, I find him attractive. But maybe I'm not even attracted *to* him. "There's been no substantial flirting. I haven't fantasized about any first kiss. And I certainly haven't made any moves to get one."

Mal looks less than impressed with my argument. "I don't think that means what you think it does."

"You don't think it means that while he's undeniably handsome, I'm only interested in a totally platonic relationship with him?" I spell out what I thought was the obvious interpretation of my feelings.

"No."

I can't lie. I was hoping for more than a one-word response to that. "Why not? I think Abbas is hella pretty, but I don't want to kiss him, and it definitely has to do with my not having those sorts of feelings for him." I decide it's time to turn things back to her. "Unlike you. Who does have those sorts of feelings for him, is definitely kissing him, and still wants to maintain a platonic relationship, which for your information, no longer exists." I bug my eyes out at her, just to emphasize how hard it would be to find this elusive platonic relationship now.

"Don't you see?" she calls out, inexplicably exasperated with me. "That's exactly why I know what I'm talking about. There was an instant thing between me and Abbas. And it wasn't even attraction. It was connection. But he's Abbas. And even in the first twenty-four hours of knowing him, I knew that kissing him was utterly out of the question. Mostly because he tried to sleep with me less than thirty minutes after we met." She grimaces, half in mockery at his efforts and half in pain. "I spent seven years not wanting to kiss him, Greer. Seven years making zero moves. Never flirting. Until one stupid night of grief and bourbon fucked it all up." She drops her spoon in the ice cream carton and pushes it away. "Know why?"

"Why?"

“Because I didn’t spend seven years not kissing him because I wasn’t in love with him. I spent seven years not kissing him because I was. And because kissing him when I was in love with him was out of the question when I knew that kiss would give him the power to destroy me at any given second of any given day after. And it wouldn’t matter if he wanted to or not. Because he’s Abbas. So, he would. Eventually.”

“Mallory.” I want to say something, anything to comfort her, but outside of her name, the words stop coming out.

“The only difference between you and me, Greer, is that I’ve been honest with myself since the moment I met him. And you haven’t been,” she says, her voice quiet, her tone somber.

“That’s not the only difference,” I whisper, too scared of my own truth to say it out loud. “I’m not scared he’d have the power to destroy me. I’m scared I’d have the power to destroy him.” Because I’m my mother’s daughter. All the years my father’s raised me on his own just means I know better than to put anyone through what she put us through.

Mallory reaches across the counter and takes my hand, squeezing it softly. Our eyes meet and it’s the first I notice we’ve both been crying. Silent tears streak her cheeks, but she musters a smile.

“I love you, Greer,” she says on a breath laced with emotions. “But that’s just another lie you tell yourself.”



LACHLAN

WHEN I COME BACK OUT to the living room after putting Monroe to bed, I find Abbas and Chase sprawled out on the sofa and recliner, each eating from a different bag of chips and carrying on a heated debate of some sort.

I plop myself onto the sofa next to my brother, expecting to listen quietly until I’m caught up on the back and forth of the moment, but they stop talking as soon as I sit. Or, rather, they stop talking to each other.

“Do you have a thing for Greer?” Abbas asks before I can even pull the throw pillow out from behind my back and get comfortable.

“Are you talking to me?”

My brother snorts. “He’s not asking me.”

“Is that what you guys were in here discussing? Me and Greer?” It’s not news to me that Chase lacks boundaries and all respect for people’s privacy. I do find it more than a little disconcerting he’s found three other people who share this character flaw and that they all chose to team up and tackle life together. And thus, everyone’s they come in contact with. Which now apparently includes my life as well.

“No, we were discussing Abbas and Mal. And then that led to Mal and Greer which led to Greer and you,” Chase explains.

“There is no me and Greer.” I reconsider my statement and offer an alternate version, “There is no me and Greer in a romantic sense. There is a me and Greer in a business arrangement.”

Abbas laughs.

And Chase looks like he’s trying to stuff his entire head into his bag of Cheetos.

“I don’t see why that’s funny.” I lean back, crossing both arms over my chest. I’ve never been good at being laughed at. My mom always tried to sway me to laugh along, but I couldn’t ever quite get there. Definitely not there now.

“It’s just funny because we were just saying how that would be Greer’s response too,” Chase says, slowly resurfacing from the Cheetos. He has bright orange dust attached to his eyebrows from diving into the bag. It makes up for his laughing at me a little bit. More so since I don’t tell him about it.

“I would think that would be less humorous and more just confirming things.” I reach over and steal a handful of cheese puffs from him. “Obviously, we’re on the same page. We’re communicating. Doing what we need to do to make sure we both get what we want, and nobody gets hurt or confused in the process.” All things I’ve worried about since agreeing to her crazy idea this afternoon. But, hearing their take on her perspective, does a lot to ease my concerns.

“You would think that,” Abbas says, still smirking as he crunches away on his chips. “Because you don’t know her.”

“But you will.” Chase wiggles his brows at me in a weird way I’m not even sure how to interpret. “Since you’re marrying her and all.”

I sit up taller again. “Look, I get that you two know her inside and out. But I really think you’re reading more into this than you should,” I tell them. “Even her father, who arguably has known her longest, didn’t act this weird about our plan. In fact, he seemed more than okay with it.”

Chase stops eating. “You met Papa Reads?”

Instantly, I know I said the wrong thing. “Have you not met Morton?” It seems unlikely given the overlapping of lives around here. Surely, he’s come to family dinner on Sundays a time or two over the last seven years.

“We know Papa Reads.” Even Abbas is looking uncannily serious.

“But we had to wait three years to meet him,” Chase finishes.

I frown. “What are you talking about?” There’s no way. It’s not like the man is kept locked away in a tower. He owns a bookstore. It’s open to the public. With story time welcoming imaginations of all ages. I saw the sign.

“It’s true,” Abbas says, completely straight-faced, no hint of messing with me to be seen or heard. “She has this whole thing about not introducing people who aren’t going to be around for the long haul. Says he’s had to say too many goodbyes in his life to add anymore. So, unless she’s certain you’re anchored into her world, you don’t walk through the sacred gate to meet Papa Reads.”

“He’s like the most precious thing in the whole world to her,” Chase confirms. “But he’s not fragile, and his heart is open to literally everyone. Doesn’t matter if he’s known you two seconds or twenty years.”

“Then why make people wait?” Sometimes I feel like knowing this woman is a nonstop ride on a Ferris wheel. She’s fun and honest and everything about her is out in the open to see, and yet I still find myself going round and round in circles, getting dizzy anytime I make the mistake of looking down at the wrong time.

“I would think that part would be obvious,” Chase mutters, returning his attention to the Cheetos in his lap. “Papa Reads isn’t the fragile one who’s said too many goodbyes, she is. And not just because her mom walked out when she was little. A couple of years after she split, Greer’s best friend died in a car crash. I think she decided then and there, she was done having her heart broken. So, now she has all these crazy policies around everything, including Papa Reads. Like keeping people away from him because it keeps her at a distance from them too. Distance equals protection. And so on and so forth.”

I look to Abbas just to be sure he doesn’t want to contradict anything my brother has said.

He doesn't. "Your brother dated the high school guidance counselor two years ago. We've had her professionally analyzed." He opens his mouth wide to slide a tortilla chip inside before he crunches down on it and adds, "He started on Mallory too."

"Started?" I ask, not entirely sure I really want to know the answer.

"He spent one afternoon alone with her and broke up with me. Said I was toxic by association and he couldn't open his life up to something that unhealthy," Chase says dryly.

I grin back at Abbas. "Can we go back to talking about you now? This feels like a good segue."

He just shrugs. "Hey, at least I can say I know the crazy I'm getting myself into. You're just waltzing in blindly and doing it to the tune of the Wedding March."

I rub both palms over my knees, getting increasingly uncomfortable with each reference to my upcoming nuptials. Fake or otherwise, it's not something I'm taking lightly, and all the jokes are making me think I'm still not taking it seriously enough. "Look, I'm not doubting that you know Greer better than I do, but I'm telling you, you're reading way too much into my meeting her dad. I was just there to pick up Monroe. Greer had all the kids there for story time at the shop." I pause, taking in the double doses of skepticism being doled out to me. "But if you still don't believe me, I'll talk to her. I'll make sure it was as insignificant as I've been saying all along."

Chase puts down the bag he was seconds away from tilting to his lips to funnel any remaining crumbs toward his mouth. "You can't do that."

"Why not? She calls me out for shit all the time. I really think she'd appreciate a straightforward approach here." This much at least, I'm sure I know about her.

"Absolutely," Abbas agrees. "She's a fan of direct and to the point."

"Yes." Chase nods emphatically. "She is. Except this time, she has no idea what the point is and if you come in all direct and straightforward and calling her out for it, it's going to freak her the fuck out and you're not going to have a fake fiancée to take home on Friday."

Abbas shakes his bag, head dipped down like he's searching for remaining chips among the crumbs. "That, and you'll lose her before you get a chance to figure out you have a thing for her."

I don't even answer. I just stare at my brother who does a half shrug, half nod. "We learned a lot when I was sleeping with the guidance counselor."



CHAPTER TWELVE

GREER “Can I bring Cheese?” I ask, before I’m even in the apartment with both feet. “Mallory is saying I can’t, but I’m thinking as his royal highness you should have some pull here. He’s perfectly healthy, you know. I really don’t think he’ll pose any risk to the rats in Linden.” I pause trying to think of all the elements to my argument. Then I remember the most important one, “Also, he’s my emotional support animal.”

“Do you even know where he is at the moment?” Lachlan asks. It takes me a second to follow his voice across the open space and to the desk along the window to the balcony aka fire escape. He’s standing, but leaning slightly, one hand holding a pen like he was writing something but didn’t want to take the time to sit and do it properly. I get it. When you have a toddler in your midst, sitting just to get up every ten seconds often seems like more effort than it’s worth.

“Of course, I know where he is.” I never know where he is. I could guess and, within three or four tries, probably wind up in the ballpark of where he is though.

Lachlan puts the pen down, either because I caught him just as he was finished with whatever he was doing, or because he’s determined I’m more time consuming than he initially thought when he held onto it thinking he could get back to whatever he was still doing. “Okay,” he smiles and it’s the first I notice he has a dimple near his left cheekbone. “Where?”

“Where?” I repeat the question, stalling.

“Yeah.” He nods, stepping away from the desk and moving in my direction. He looks especially casual today in raggedy old jeans and a simple white T. “Where is Cheese?”

I have to think back to the last time I saw him darting off somewhere to at least get a sense of the general direction he was headed. But images are overlapping, and I can’t be sure which was most recent. Or when most recent even was. He’s a free-spirited rat, he can’t be contained. “Why is this even relevant?”

“Just seems he should be near at all times if your emotional health and wellbeing depend on his support,” he says, a smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“He’s always with me.” I place my hand over my heart. “In here.”

“Uh-huh.” He tilts his head to the side, eyes dropping to Mo who wanders in from the hall happily jabbering away. To my rat. Who’s perched in her hair on top of her head. “Maybe he could be with you in a more physical way moving forward.”

I watch as Mo loops around the coffee table, grabs a handful of apple slices from a plate there, and carries on back down the hall, still chatting it up with Cheese. “I could definitely work on that, yeah.”

He chuckles quietly. It’s deep and smooth and makes me smile involuntarily just hearing it. “Then, yes, Cheese can come.” He comes to a stop a few feet in front of me. “Is the vote thing still happening?”

“Possibly,” I mumble, spinning ninety degrees to my left on the ball of my foot and marching toward the oven. I smell sweet things. Or I did. Before I got distracted by Lachlan and how sweet he looked standing in front of me, taking our ridiculous rituals of friendship seriously despite their lacking in maturity and common sense. “Though I’m not sure Mal gets a vote right now.” Not now that I’m feeling the effects of all the mind meddling she did last night, trying to screw up my view of Lachlan. And that’s definitely what this is. Mal, getting in my head. It’s not real.

“Calling her out for sleeping with Abbas didn’t level the playing field like you were counting on, huh?” he asks, following me into the kitchen.

“Oh, it definitely leveled the playing field.” I peek inside the oven. Chase made cinnamon rolls. From scratch. *Yum*. “Just not in the way I was planning.” I straighten up again and turn in his direction. He’s leaning against the counter now, arms at his sides, both hands resting on the edge of the counter, framing his hips. I can feel my face getting tight in frustration just looking at him. Yesterday, I would have simply appreciated how pretty he looks in Chase’s kitchen. Now, thanks to Mal poking around and planting dirty seeds in my previously untainted brain, I can’t help but wonder if it’s more than that. Do I want to do to Lachlan what I do to most things I find in here, and have a taste?

“Do you not like cinnamon buns?” he asks, breaking my train of thought and confusing the hell out of me with this unexpected direction the tracks are now going in.

“I love cinnamon buns.” Are there really people out there who don’t?

He laughs. “Then why do you look pissed off ever since you stuck your head in the oven?”

“It’s not important.” I flick my wrist in a dismissive gesture and quickly change the subject. “What is important, is that I am going to spend the day prepping for my new role. And that includes learning my character’s backstory.” I open the oven door again, just to get a whiff. The cinnamon rolls aren’t nearly close enough to being done for me to have one and be at Nora’s in time to discuss her needing to snag a substitute nanny from the service for the next two months. “Have anything in mind?”

“I kind of thought we would just stick with the real story there. Keep things simple. You know, less lies, less chances of getting caught in one.”

I close the oven and stand again, leaning against it to soak up the warmth and revel in the lingering sweet scent as long as possible. “I’m good with that,” I agree. “But we’ll still need to come up with a tale of your romancing me and proposing and such. And even if we go with our real stories, we’ll still need to catch each other up on some basics about each other if we want people to believe we’re a couple.”

Lachlan looks like he wants to say something but isn’t sure if he should. Which in my world, means I absolutely want him to.

“What?”

“It’s just...there are like seven or eight books written about me. Five are available in audio. Want me to just get you the most accurate one?”

I really want to not laugh at that. He can’t help he’s famous and people write books about him, but still. It sounds too crazy not to laugh.

Clearly, he’s aware. “I know. It sounds...well, how it sounds.”

“Efficient.” I do a half roll of my eyes, thinking it over. “It sounds efficient. And very convenient. So yes, I’ll take an audiobook of your life, Prince Lachlan.” I start for the door again, giving up my dreams of cinnamon rolls for good. “Unfortunately, I can’t offer you anything even remotely similar. The only books written about my life are my journals and it’s probably not safe to give you those.”

He smirks. “They’re probably a hell of a lot more interesting than the biography you’re about to suffer through.” He follows me to the door, surprising me when he reaches the handle and opens it before I get to it. “But I think maybe I’ll just let you tell me all about yourself tomorrow on the plane.”

“Perfect. We can also brainstorm our romance then.” I start to leave. It feels weird having the door held open for me though. Not bad weird, but weird. Like having someone hold your door open to your own house when they don’t even live there. Maybe that happens to other people, but it’s certainly never happened to me. “Thanks.” I smile, acknowledging his gentlemanly act. Then, I bolt

across the hall and disappear inside my own place. Away from Lachlan's yummy chuckle and sweet gestures. And the yummy and sweet cinnamon rolls. Basically, all yummy and sweet things.

Ten minutes later, I'm running out the door again, this time headed to Nora's. I'm still making my way down the stairs when I get a text from Lachlan along with the promised link to listen to his life story. By the time my feet hit the sidewalk, I've got my earbuds in and the narrator filling my head with all sorts of facts I definitely ought to know about the man I'm about to fake marry. Well, marry for real, but have a fake marriage with.

For starters, he has a peanut allergy that could kill him, broke his collarbone in a skateboarding accident when he was nine and saved a woman's life when he was seventeen and witnessed a hit and run by a drunk driver. Apparently, if Lachlan hadn't been there to pull the woman from her car, she would have gone up in flames with it before the fire truck and ambulance even had time to arrive.

When I get to Nora's, I've learned enough to know *my* real story isn't going to hold up well to his. No one is going to believe that the royal prince who once spent a year living in every homeless shelter in Linden to better assess how to improve the situation from the inside out, wants to marry a woman who spent that same year of her own life on a mission to read every worst rated book on Amazon just because it seemed like an entertaining way to broaden her horizons a bit.

Thankfully, once at the apartment, I have to escape Lachlan's life for a bit to sort out my own. Nora isn't happy on her own behalf, but she's oddly excited for me, causing me to put her in the temporarily on hold friendship file with Mallory for the duration of our visit. And actually, the rest of the day. Though, it becomes less pressing to intentionally ignore her once she leaves for work and is no longer present to be ignored. Even her words fade quickly into the background when Liz and Aiden's voices take over the forefront of everything.

The day flies by in a blur of kids and random moments with Stevi. That's the name of the narrator filling me in on Lachlan. By lunchtime it feels like we're old girlfriends and I've been calling her by her name ever since.

"I need to look royal," I announce as I plop myself into Sydney's chair.

"Don't you always look like a queen when I get done with you?" she asks, sounding slightly offended.

"No," I start, then realize how it sounds, "I mean, yes, you always make me look amazing. But I mean, I need to look like a literal queen. And not in a flashy, fabulous way. In a stuffy, small, still very old-timey in a lot of ways, European way."

Her brow crinkles and the hand that was just assessing my braids, falls away from my head. "I'm sorry, what?"

"It's for a part I got," I explain the simplest way I know how to. "I'm playing the new wife of a young prince about to be king. But it's not so easy, because there are people who want to steal the throne out from under him," I pause, trying to determine how much detail is enough and how much is too much. "Anyway, the wife plays a big role in helping him save his kingdom, and as such, she needs to look the part. Or I do, rather."

"This some sort of Shakespearian thing? It sounds all dark and likely full of family betrayals," Syd muses, officially starting on my hair.

"Nope," I sigh, saying a mental goodbye to my own reflection. "Just your standard fairy tale with evil stepmothers and jealous stepsiblings."

"What's the princesses' backstory then? Cursed by a witch? Locked in a tower? Forced into hiding out with seven super short men?" she asks, skilled hands moving over my scalp to deconstruct

the style I've loved for three years now. Not that I haven't had to wear my hair differently for other parts, but this will be the most drastic change I've seen myself go through in a long time.

"No backstory," I tell her, having spent the last few hours convincing myself she didn't need one – that I didn't need one. "The story is really all about the prince. The princess just has to show up and look the part." And that I can do.

Turns out, I can do it better than even I imagined. With Sydney's help and an hour spent digging through Mallory's work wardrobe, I emerge from my Greer cocoon the following morning, fit to be Lady Greer. That's what I've unofficially named my character. I don't really expect to be called that by anyone, but inside my head, while I am practicing mannerisms and adjusting my vocabulary to add more dimension beyond hair, makeup and costume, I'm *Lady Greer*.



LACHLAN

I CHECK ALL MY LUGGAGE one last time, just to be sure I haven't forgotten anything. Sometimes I think I'm so used to being waited on hand and foot, I've become too incompetent to manage even the basics of adulthood. Like packing my own bag.

"I see McKenna's being nice to you again," my brother says, standing in the open doorway and tossing my phone onto the bed where I'm standing, mentally assessing my travel checklist. "She just wished you a safe trip home. Apparently, she can't wait to come for the wedding."

I snort. It's amazing how many people are looking forward to that even when they know it's not for real. "She's probably still drunk from yesterday. Started taking shots of tequila at her desk when I told her the news. And I opened with it. She was on shot three and furiously stamping away at forms declaring Triston no longer a person of interest in the search for Monroe's paternity when I left." I met her after hours and she was done for the day once she was done with me. Still, she keeps a bottle of tequila in her desk drawer for a reason. I assume there are days she doesn't make it through to five pm. And not because she has reason to celebrate.

"How did it go with Mom?" he asks, moving further into the room. This very question is the reason I made sure I came back to the apartment while he was stuck at a late parent teacher conference, and then stayed in the room with Monroe, pretending I was already asleep once he got home.

"Fine." I zip up my garment bag, accepting what is or isn't packed, and move it over to the chair in the corner so I have more room when I go through the really important stuff. Monroe's diaper bag.

"Just fine?" Chase prods.

"Obviously, she was thrilled to hear I finally pulled my head out of my ass and stopped the madness of trying to reunite Monroe with her birthfather." I should have bought more diapers. I'll have to pick some up on the way to the airport.

"And," Chase continues to press the issue, "did you tell her how you were going about keeping your daughter as well as your royal status?"

I shrug. "Didn't need to."

"Excuse me?" My brother's eyes look like they're about to pop out of his head.

"It didn't come up," I say calmly, pretending to be more focused on the contents of this diaper bag than our conversation. I'm not. I know because I've counted the pairs of socks in my hand multiple times, and I still don't know how many I'm holding. "Once I told her Monroe was coming home with me, she was too excited to bother with details." Three. I'm holding three pairs of socks. I need at

least five. My kid is notorious for kicking things off her feet and winding up barefoot every time I look away for more than a few seconds.

“Don’t you think she’s going to be a little upset when she finds out you got married and no one told her?” He frowns. “What’s the bigger issue here? You don’t want to tell her the truth? Or you don’t want to lie to her?”

“I *want* to tell her the truth.” I drop the socks for the moment, surrendering to my brother’s incessant harping on about having this conversation despite my obvious attempts not to. “But I can’t because telling her the truth but telling my father a lie, feels wrong on levels beyond which I can find within myself to justify. But lying to Mom about getting married -” I can’t even bring myself to finish that sentence. I’m her first born. She had two boys after growing up with all sisters. Chase and I both spent out childhood hearing wistful fantasies of the day we’d grow up and get married and she’d have daughters she couldn’t wait to love as her own just as much as she loved the sons who were. Then Chase took himself out of the running to make that fantasy a reality and now here I am, about to deliver the day she’s so looked forward to, only it won’t be real. She’ll fall in love with Greer, whom she likely already adores, and dive heart-first into every dream she holds for our future, anticipating more grandchildren and family holidays and who knows what else, only to have me rip it all out from under her in two months again. It would be less cruel to have her find out I got married and didn’t tell her. And then tell her why.

“Sounds to me like you only have one option then.” Chase grins. “Tell Mom you’re getting married. And then figure out how to make it be for real.”

My brow dips, starting to crinkle before I retract the frown. “Seriously? You too? What is it with all of you and your need to meddle in each other’s relationships?”

He laughs. “It’s not like we do it all the time.”

“I find that a little hard to believe.” I pull a large duffle bag down the mattress closer to me. I need to find more socks for Monroe. “All you four have done since I showed up here is meddle. First with me and Monroe. Then Abbas and Mallory. And now, it’s back to me again. Only this time it’s me and Greer everyone wants to share their opinions on.” I stop what I’m doing and turn back to look at him. “How come you’re not in the mix?”

Chase shrugs. “Wasn’t my week.” Then he laughs again. “Plus, we don’t *always* meddle in each other’s business. Eat each other’s food, sure. Vote on major life decision as a unit, yes. But generally, we don’t go around pushing our unsolicited advice on each other.”

“I must be special then,” I grumble, getting back to packing.

“No.” His hand lands on my shoulder, causing me to stop what I’m doing and look at him. “Greer is.”

He’s so serious about it, I can’t even respond with a joke. Which I want to. Because I don’t do serious about women. Haven’t in as long as I can remember. There just hasn’t been the time or space for it. “Look,” he goes on, “obviously, you’re special to me personally, being my big brother and all.” He cracks a small smile again. “But I think you already know, deep down, you’re not just agreeing to this insane plan because you think it will work.”

“You don’t think it will work?” I can’t keep track with where he’s going anymore.

“Oh, I know it’ll work,” he says, nodding. “But it’ll probably fuck you up along the way *before* it works. And I just want you to be prepared. So you don’t freak out when it happens. Just...ride it out.”

“You’re freaking me out a little *right now*,” I tell him, abandoning all efforts to get organized for my trip, at least for the moment. “What are you talking about, man?!”

"I'm talking about you." The smile fades again. "And about how much you've changed just in the last few days of knowing her."

"I haven't changed," I argue, but my mind is already searching my memories for evidence he could be right. Have I been different?

"Excuse me, but I think I know you pretty damn well, and yes, you've changed." He moves through the room to the chair I left my garment bag in. I notice it gets relocated to the floor only seconds before his ass replaces it in the chair. "Lachlan, in a million years, you never would have agreed to go home and fake a marriage to beat Apsel and the step-monster at their own game."

That proves nothing. "I'm desperate. When Greer came up with that idea, I was ready to do just about anything."

"No, you weren't." He leans back. "You were frozen stiff, caught between two impossible choices because you play by the rules and the rules weren't giving you any other options." He chuckles, shaking his head ever so slightly. "Face it, if anyone else would have come to you with that plan, you would have shot them down and told them they were insane."

"It's not that insane. She's an actress. She plays different parts all the time. This will just be the most elaborate production she's ever been cast in," I reason, repeating the things Greer said to convince me in the first place.

"I'm an actor. Hell, I teach it. You know the talent pool I have access to? I could have held auditions just with past students who already graduated."

I can feel my face distort itself at the mention of his students. Graduated or not, they're just barely inching their way into adulthood and I haven't been attracted to anyone that age since I *was* that age. "It's not the same."

"I know." He grins again. "Because I'm not Greer. And I don't make you believe like she does."

My expression moves from disgust to bothered. "I believe in you."

"I know that. I'm not talking about your belief in me." He gets up again, this time he starts for the door. "Greer makes you believe in the impossible. That's what makes her special. To you. Because you only believe in what you can see, and she's the first person who's ever been able to show you the things you can't." His fingers drum the doorframe as he lingers in it a moment longer. "You're both totally going to fuck this up. The trick will be taking turns." He smirks. "But you're a gentleman, so you'll let her go first. And when she does..."

"Ride it out," I finish, referring to the insanity that started this entire conversation.

He nods. "Ride it out." Then he taps the doorframe twice, winks, and disappears.

Whether or not I packed enough socks for my kid, I won't know until I run out. Or not. Depending on how well I functioned while my brain was trying to unscramble itself after listening to my brother for too long about too many things that made too little sense.

But, my bags are zipped and shut and buckled up and just as soon as Greer comes flying through the door, we can head downstairs to meet the driver and car already waiting to take us to the airport.

"Should I go over there and check on her?" I ask Chase, who's sitting on the couch, busy giving Monroe her last pony ride on his knee before we leave.

"Only if you want her to be late," he says without breaking his attention away from his niece. "Greer is super punctual, but she never has a second to spare. Times everything down to the last moment."

"Got it." I notice Abbas watching me from across the kitchen where he's been holding the same cup of coffee since I walked in. I have yet to see him take a drink from it. I'm starting to suspect it's empty and he just can't get himself to walk across the hall to get a refill. Fairly sure Chase had to

bring him that cup to begin with. “You better get things sorted out with Mallory before the wedding. I’m not sending tickets for your plus ones, so you’ll have to be each other’s,” I tease.

“I get a plus one, though. Right?” Chase calls over from the sofa. “Because I kind of already asked someone.”

“Yes, you get a plus one,” I confirm, already curious to see who he’ll be bringing. I’m tempted to ask, but after the earful he gave me about his view on my love life, I’m not sure I can handle any insights on his own right now.

Abbas’s mouth opens, for what purpose I’ll never know. There’s a knock at the door before he can get the words out.

“Are you expecting someone?” I ask, directing my question at both of them, but they both look as stumped by the sound as I feel, so I don’t wait for a response. Already closest to the door, I take the last few steps until I can grasp the handle and pull it open. “Greer?”

“Sweetheart.” She smiles. “Darling? My love? Charming?” Then she giggles, bouncing her shoulders and shaking her head as she moves past me and walks inside. “I’ll have to keep trying them out, see which one sticks by the time we land.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Lady Greer,” Chase greets her, hoisting Monroe onto his hip as he walks over from the living room. “You look so fancy! You know all the king’s knights are going to fight over you.” He wiggles his brows, and I don’t know if she laughs because of how he looks or what he’s said. Either way, she seems overall pleased with the response she’s getting to her new appearance.

I have to admit, she does know what she’s doing. Every last detail fits the part. She’s traded her long, black and teal braids for natural curls that reach just above her shoulders, completely hiding the parts of her scalp which are shaved. The champagne colored, long sleeved blouse is covered in ruffles at her neckline and wrists, keeping secret every inch of ink beneath the silk and the wide leg, black trousers are every bit as boring as they sound, eliminating any shred of her personality that was previously visible in her wardrobe choices. Even her makeup is little more than tiny, natural-like hues of color and she’s removed the septum piercing from her nose. Lastly, I notice her mouth. No more signature hot pink lips in sight.

She looks perfect. Beautiful even. But I can’t help but think that every hint of Greer has disappeared, and the thought alone brings an ache to my chest, and a single thought on a breath past my lips, “Shit.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REER

G “What?” I could have sworn I just heard Lachlan utter a four-letter word under his breath. Considering he was eyeing me from head to toe in slow motion right before he said it, I’m not exactly feeling a boost of confidence from the reaction. “Do you not like it?”

His brows climb unnaturally high on his forehead even as he’s obviously trying to cover his initial reaction. “No. I mean. Yes.” He clears his throat and starts over. “I definitely like how seriously you’re taking this.” His hand starts to gesture up and down along my body. “All of this, it’s perfect. Really. Beyond what I was even expecting.”

“You weren’t expecting me to handle this like a professional?” I ask, quirking a brow at him.

“I was,” he insists, getting increasingly flustered.

“I’m just teasing you.” I reach out to put a hand on his arm. “I’m glad you’re happy with the results of my efforts. But know that if there’s anything you want me to change, anything you were expecting to be different, I am happy to try and accommodate you in whatever way I can. You’re the boss, here. For the next two months, I answer to you.”

“Why do I feel like a part of your soul just died a little uttering those words,” Abbas jokes from where he’s standing in the kitchen, swinging a mug around so carelessly, I have to assume it’s been empty for a while.

“Mal already left for work,” I tell him, forgoing a response to his statement. “And there’s still half a pot of coffee.”

He doesn’t waste time with an answer. Just zips past us and out into the hall.

“Speaking of leaving,” Lachlan re-enters the conversation. “We should probably get going too. I have a car waiting downstairs whenever you’re ready.” He smiles. It’s sweet and accommodating and not at all like the smiles I’ve witnessed from Lachlan in the last week. The energy around him feels different too. Lighter. Like the weight of losing Mo has finally started to lift.

“All of my stuff is right inside my door.” I point over my shoulder and toward my own apartment. “I can get most of it, but I might need a hand with the big duffle.”

“Chase?” Lachlan looks to his brother.

“Sorry, I’m on baby duty.” He grins, bobbing Monroe up and down and making her giggle.

“I’ll get Abbas to do it,” I tell them.

“What am I doing?” Of course, Abbas shows up in the doorway the second I mention his name.

“Helping me with my bags.” I fist a handful of his shirt and start to tug him back across the hall with me.

“But I just made myself the perfect cup of coffee,” he whines. “It’ll be cold by the time I get all your shit downstairs and then back here to drink it.”

“If I don’t get downstairs with all these things in time to get in the car and get to the airport and get on my plane, I can’t go to Linden and marry a prince and you can’t come to my wedding and stay at the castle,” I remind him flatly.

“Alright, alright,” he mumbles, slurping coffee in a hurry all the way up until the moment he has to set the cup down on the counter.

From that moment on, things start to operate more smoothly than normal. At least, in terms of what I would deem normal for my life. Lachlan seems to think everything is business as usual, from the

driver loading our luggage, to the comfy ride in the limousine, to boarding the private jet, which in hindsight, I couldn't have missed because I was one of its three only passengers.

"And here I was thinking how cool it would be to fly first class for the first time in my life," I mumble, taking in the cabin of our plane and trying hard not to gape at everything in sight. "Not that I was even sure we'd do that."

"You thought I'd fly you back to Linden, preparing to announce you were my royal bride, in coach?" He smirks, gesturing for me to have a seat in one of the reclining leather seats near the windows.

"That's how everyone in my world flies anywhere." I glide into the seat. It's the most comfortable piece of furniture I think I've ever sat on. "And up until we met your driver in the street outside my building, you fit into that world too easily to make me question it." I watch as one of the jet's flight attendants unfolds a built-in playpen from the wall for Monroe. I'm so completely out of my league here, I may start to panic if I dwell on it too long. "I guess it does seem a little silly though, now that my perspective of your life is broadening a bit."

He shakes his head. "Not silly." He places Mo inside the secured play area and then takes a seat in the cushy chair across from mine, same creamy colored, smooth leather as the one I'm sitting in. "Kind of great, to tell you the truth." He takes a cup of coffee offered by the attendant and thanks her. I notice her eyes stay glued to him even as she hands me a cup as well. Alexa, I think she said her names was. Blonde and blue-eyed and every bit as perky and beautiful as you'd expect the flight attendant on a private jet belonging to a handsome young prince to be. Provided you'd take the time to imagine such scenarios, which I never have. But moving forward I most certainly will. I'm not keen on walking into any more surprises like this.

"How is it great that I wasn't prepared to rule out the possibility of flying coach while traveling with a royal?" I ask, blowing the steam from my cup. I'm glad I didn't just blindly start sipping, my insides would be scorched right now.

"It's great that the royal thing wasn't real enough for you to think it could be ruled out," he explains, and I notice he's making no attempts at drinking his coffee either. He must be used to the boiling temps of it. Apparently, they don't worry much about lawsuits here. "Usually, my title is more real to people than I am. But then, when I come to the states, I get to escape all of that for a while and just be myself. I think it's part of why I hang around my brother and Abbas so much. They're some of the only people who still remember who I was before I left."

"That's why no one told Mal and me the whole story of your family business," I surmise, putting together pieces I hadn't realized were still left out of the puzzle until now.

"Exactly." He ventures a first sip and seems to regret it instantly, judging by the pained expression that follows. "It's become a refreshing glimpse of reality anytime I get to meet his friends and they treat me like I'm just his boring older brother." He smirks. "Of course, the same can't be said for being confused for a demon."

"Not refreshing? Or you're just not willing to deem it a glimpse of reality," I quip, giving in and trying my coffee as well. It doesn't instantly blister my throat on the way down, but it's definitely still hot enough to encourage swallowing with caution.

"God, I hope that's not a realistic description of the first impression I leave in my wake." He laughs. "Though I notice I wasn't so demonic, I managed to scare you away."

"Well, you were half naked," I point out. "Even a demon loses some of his intimidation factor when clad in nothing but a towel."

A small crashing sound follows my comment, and I turn back just in time to see a flushed Alexa straighten out a tray of snacks she was in the process of preparing as her next offering. Apparently, the thought of Lachlan in a towel has that effect on women who view him first and foremost as the prince. Not that I wasn't pleased with the sight myself, but it didn't send me in a tizzy, and I certainly don't recall dropping anything. And not just because the only thing I was holding was half and half and my commitment to coffee goes beyond my commitment to being thrilled at the sight of hot half-naked men. I like them both, but only one of them can be depended on to deliver under every circumstance. And in my experience, it's not the hot naked guys.

"So," I move on to other topics before Alexa drops her tray again. I saw pastries among the breakfast buffet coming our way, so I'm invested in seeing her succeed now. "How similar would you say Lindish is to English? Am I going to be able to communicate with people once I get there? Or am I going to be stuck talking only to you for the foreseeable future?"

He chuckles quietly and I notice he's also observing Alexa. It's hard to say what's drawing his interest, though I suspect it's not the pastries, and from where he's sitting, he's got the better vantage point. "You'll be able to speak to anyone you choose," he says, eyes still in sync with Alexa's motions and I catch myself start to scowl. I can't really be jealous. Clearly, this act is already taking on a life of its own. "Everyone my father employs, from his advisers to the doormen, is fluent in English. It's a requirement he set when I was a child, to ensure a smooth transition for me on my visits from the States."

"Handy." I reach up and start to twist my hair between my fingers, a habit I picked up when I wore it in braids all the time. Now that it's shorter, I'm disappointed to find it requires more effort and delivers less comfort. "And should I choose to leave the castle?"

"You'll have a translator." He nods, indicating Alexa moving in behind me. "Along with your driver. And security. And a P.A."

"What do I need a P.A. for?" I ask, greedily examining the tray held in front of me. "Are you putting me to work when I get there?" I choose a twisty, glazed situation with a cream cheese filling bursting out of every end and thank Alexa before I look back at Lachlan, sounding extra excited when I add, "Am I going to be in charge of something?"

He smiles broadly and lifts his head as if to nod, only to say, "No." He chooses more responsibly from Alexa's spread, taking a banana for himself and a buttery, deliciously flaky croissant for Mo, which she happily takes from his hands before Lachlan can even thank Alexa. Then, his attention turns back to me. "But that reminds me, I have a phone call to make."

"Royal business?" I ask, eyeing my yummy, twisted mess for the best place to take the perfect first bite.

"Wedding business." He winks, taking his phone from his pocket. "I think it's time I tell my parents about the surprise I'm bringing home with me."

"Oh." The perfect bite nearly winds up perfectly lodged in my throat. Things just became terrifyingly real. "Right." My stomach turns and I'm reminded of how I always wind up curled over a trashcan on opening night. Somehow, I'd expected that to be different here. Now that I'm faced with the proverbial curtains being lifted for our opening scene, I'm sorry to say, it's not.

Before I can conjure reasons to stall, and long before I could voice them if I had a chance to think them, Lachlan has the phone out, holding it between us on speaker so I can hear as well. It only rings twice before someone answers. A man's voice, gruffer than Lachlan's but familiar in a way that leads me to believe it must be his father.

"I was wondering when I'd hear from you," he greets Lachlan, a delighted chuckle following his words. "Dresdon just notified me the plane is circling the runway, so I assume you're on board and headed home?"

"Yes, sir," Lachlan confirms, eyes locked on mine when he adds, "and I'm not alone."

"Oh?" Even before he knows the reasons, he sounds pleased. "I hope that means Monroe is with you."

"She is." He smiles at me. Not the way you'd expect a co-conspirator to smile at his partner in crime, but eerily similar to the way you might imagine a love-sick man to gaze at the woman of his dreams moments before he tells his family about his plans to marry her. "And so is Greer. My fiancée."

If I ever thought I was hungry enough to eat the giant pastry in my hand, I can't remember what that felt like. My stomach is suddenly so tied in knots, not even licking the cream cheese filling seems possible. I try to gulp down my bout of nerves, which I have to conclude are a new and unpleasant form of stage fright and not at all related to Lachlan giving me his dreamy eyes, so that I can say a cheery 'hi' to my future father-in-law, the king, when I catch sight of something else out of the corner of my eye. Alexa. Lingered strangely close as if she's eavesdropping. Then, I notice she's doing more than just listen, her eyes are practically glued to Lachlan, but not in the infatuated way I initially thought, more like she's studying him. And then it hits me. She's *spying* on us. And the dreamy eyes Lachlan is giving me aren't for my sake at all. They're for hers.



LACHLAN

MY FATHER'S LAUGH BOOMS over the receiver. I knew he'd take the news well, though even I'm surprised he's so overtly overjoyed.

"You're engaged!" It's not even a question. There's not a hint of doubt to be found. "Lachlan, I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that!"

"You're not upset I didn't discuss it with you first?" I knew he wouldn't be. My father's not the one hung up on propriety and tradition. Nevertheless, acknowledging he could be upset, and certainly has a right to be, is a gesture I'm all too happy to make.

"Upset?" He laughs again, this time at how absurd he finds my question. "Not in the least." Then his tone quiets down so much so, he sounds like he's about to share a secret. "Though if you had told me beforehand, I could have let you take your pick from the family vault."

Greer covers her mouth with her hand suppressing a giggle. I think she just figured out my father has yet to master the concept of being on speakerphone. Running a country, that he can do in his sleep but when it comes to the basics of technology he struggles when left to his own devices.

"I appreciate that." I smile at her, reaching over to take her hand, finger moving over the empty spot meant for a ring. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Alexa taking in the motion with extensive interest, all but confirming my suspicions about her unexpected presence here. She's been my stepmother's personal attendant for years and the only times I've crossed paths with her were on trips we all took together. Usually, the attendants on my flight are the same who work with my father. He doesn't mind sharing. She does.

Until today, it seems.

"To be honest, father," I start, eyes moving to catch Greer's gaze. "I was hoping that offer might be extended to me even after the fact." I twine my fingers through hers until we're holding hands, both

our palms melded together, resting in her lap. She smiles and I can't help but think how easily all of this is coming to us.

"Nothing would make me happier," he says with a warmth in his voice that makes the weight of our lie rest heavy on my chest. He thinks I'm asking for the aquamarine; the same one my mother wore. "Tell me, who else has heard this most wonderful news? I don't want to rob you of your thunder and accidentally tell."

"Chase knows. And Greer's father," I pause, allowing time for my father to conclude the obvious without having to tell another lie. He'll assume on his own I asked Greer's father for his blessing before proposing. "But you're the first official call to make the announcement."

"You haven't told your mother?" It's the first time in this entire conversation he sounds thrown.

"There wasn't time." It's a partial truth. I needed more time than I had to convince myself to go through with telling her. "She's expecting a video call once I'm back home." She always does. No matter how old I get, she needs to hear I've made it safely wherever I've gone. "We're planning to tell her then."

Greer moves her free hand over mine, so it's completely enclosed by her touch. Then she squeezes it softly and I wonder if she knows how much the thought of telling my mother is eating away at me. She could. She's known my mother for years. How close they are, I haven't asked. Haven't wanted to know. Maybe if there was a chance my mother met her and disliked her, it would be helpful, but knowing both women, it's highly unlikely. If anything, my mother adores her, and revealing to her that Greer is on the verge of becoming her daughter-in-law will only aid in increasing her love and attachment to her by a million.

"Perfect, perfect," my father mumbles and I get the sense something new is tugging at his attention. It's not for lack of making me a priority, it's just the business of being king. Someone always needs something from him. It's a responsibility he carries with honor and the utmost respect. He serves his people. He doesn't rule them. "You wouldn't mind if I tell your stepmother then?" he asks after a moment of murmuring under his breath. Usually means he's been reading something. Always reads out loud to himself. Doesn't matter how often he's reminded of the many documents he's handed for his eyes only. Somehow, other's ears are never considered a problem to him. "You know how much anxiety surprises cause her."

"I wouldn't mind at all. In fact, you're welcome to spread the news far and wide. You and Mom are the only two people I value telling myself." The faster word of our engagement gets around, the better. We don't have a big window of time and a lot to get done in it. The less we have to explain ourselves, the better.

"News like that? You know I'd love nothing more than to shout it from the rooftops." He laughs again, the jolliness of his initial reaction resurfacing. "I'll have the whole place buzzing with wedding fever by the time you arrive."

"I don't doubt that you will."

We end our call on that note and I put my phone back into my pocket and out of sight where I won't have to be reminded of the conversation I just had. This is turning out to be harder than I was expecting.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GREER We've been in the air for nearly four hours when Alexa finally has to take a bathroom break.

It's like Lachlan and I've both been waiting for this very second, because we huddle together instantly when we hear the lock click on the bathroom door.

"We're going to have to wing it when we arrive and meet tonight to cover details about our pasts and relationship," he hisses. "I would have texted you, but I have a feeling seeing us both glued to our phone screens would tip her off to something too."

"How psycho is your stepmother exactly?" I whisper, eyes darting back and forth between Lachlan and the bathroom door. "How did she even know to plant a spy on your flight home?"

"I had to tell the captain how many passengers to prepare for," he says, voice so low I can barely hear him, causing me to lean in even closer. "Someone must have told her. She hates surprises. Has to control everything. She'll have felt the need to know who I was bringing home by any means necessary."

"Just asking you wasn't an option?"

"You've seen the way Alexa has been taking note of every move and word exchanged between us. My stepmother wouldn't have been remotely satisfied with simply asking and receiving a straightforward answer."

Just then, the lock clicks open again, and Alexa practically comes flying out, as if she sensed she was missing a particularly important exchange.

It takes her half a second to register us huddled together, and another half a second for me to see her notice. Then, my lips are pressing against Lachlan's and my hands are curling around the back of his neck, drawing him ever closer as if this was always the intended reason for our close proximity.

Squinting through one eye, I see her quickly turn her head and rush past us, appearing adequately embarrassed for having walked in on us in such a state. Only when I hear her bustling away in the kitchen area again, do I pull my lips away from Lachlan's.

"Nice save," he breathes, fingers grazing his lips as if he can't believe they were tangled in a kiss with mine mere seconds ago.

Now that I have time to think about it, I'm not so sure I can believe it myself. But I don't dare show it. Not for the sake of our act, either. The last thing I want is for Lachlan to have any doubts as to my abilities to remain professional through every aspect of this performance. "I was part of an Improv troupe for years," I murmur, smirking in a way I know could be interpreted in multiple ways depending on perspective. Lachlan will know I'm making a joke, but Alexa will likely assume I'm having deliciously dirty thoughts I can hardly wait to act upon. "Got really good at being spontaneously creative." I wink, sealing the impression I'm hoping to make on our audience.

"Good," he growls, giving me such a devilish smile, I imagine Alexa blushing just watching from a distance. "We're going to need those skills to get through the initial welcome when we arrive," his voice is so deep and dark again, I know there's no way Alexa can overhear us, but judging by the way he's looking at me and the way his hand continues to gently fist my hair, keeping me within kissing distance as he speaks, I don't have to guess much at what her imagination might come up with.

I move in closer, grazing my lips over his as I murmur, "We'll be fine. It'll be late anyway. I'll feign exhaustion if things get too intense for us to navigate safely."

“We keep this up, Alexa will have given my stepmother plenty of reasons to believe you.” He presses his mouth to mine one last time. Then, slowly, we pretend to tear ourselves away from each other again. Well, almost all the way. I notice even after we’re back to maintaining proper personal space, his hand continues to rest on my knee. I also notice that I like it there. And then I proceed to ignore having noticed it.

Instead, I change course all together. “How long do you want to let Monroe sleep?” She dozed off about an hour ago for her regular nap, but given the time change that comes with this trip, it’s probably best not to let her sleep the full two hours she usually does.

Lachlan glances at his watch, then looks over toward where Alexa is still fussing in the kitchen. Apparently, he can’t determine what she’s doing just from watching, because he says, “Excuse me, Alexa. I don’t mean to interrupt what you’re doing, but could you please tell me what time you’re planning to serve Monroe’s lunch?”

She looks up from her task, oddly startled, as if whatever she was doing should have been lunch related but somehow wasn’t. “Whenever you wish, your highness,” she squeaks. I’m sure she’s a wonderful flight attendant, but spy work is not an area I see her excelling in.

“If you could fix it whenever you finish up with what you’re currently doing, that would be wonderful.” He smiles at her and I swear I hear her drop something.

“Of course, your highness. Right away.” I look over my shoulder at her again, now just in time to see her abandon whatever it was she was or wasn’t doing and flitting about in the small space to accommodate Lachlan’s request as fast as she can.

“Is it just me, or does that girl need a vacation?” I mutter under my breath.

“Working for the queen does that to people,” Lachlan says dryly. “Even Monroe gets flustered around her, and usually she doesn’t even know what’s going on. It’s just a side effect of being in her presence.”

“Well, I can’t wait to meet her,” I say, sarcasm abounding. “Meanwhile, do you mind if I do the honors and wake our sleeping beauty? I’ve noticed Mo gives the best after nap snuggles.”

His face changes from the casual smile to a warmer, more intimate expression that reaches his eyes. “I wouldn’t mind at all.”

From here, the flight finds a natural rhythm of interaction between us, including Alexa who finally seems to relax a bit once Lachlan and I stop talking and canoodling and instead opt to watch a movie with Mo, a perfectly fine way to spend a couple of hours but not at all entertaining or interesting for spying purposes.

Upon landing, I notice it’s already dark out and while Lachlan assures me repeatedly we’re in Linden, we could have landed right back where we started for all I know. Though, I have to admit, even if I can’t see much, I can’t deny the air is crisper and cleaner, and the sky has about a million more stars in it here than it does over the city.

A navy-blue limo picks us up, complete with security (so much so they need their own cars, one drives ahead and one behind) and a fast-talking little man named Soren. He rides with us.

Initially, I think he’ll be more of Alexa’s soft spoken, high-strung efforts to please Lachlan’s every whim, but as soon as the doors are shut and the window to the driver is closed, I’m relieved to find nothing could be further from it.

“Her majesty, the step-monster, has been shitting kittens since she officially heard the news. From your father. Before that, she was just pacing the castle erupting poison on every maid who crossed her path. It was tragic. We lost two to the mental ward just since Alexa sent word you two were making out like horny teenagers holed up in the backseat of your dad’s stolen station wagon.”

“My dad never stole a station wagon,” Lachlan deadpans.

“Neither did mine. He doesn’t even have a driver’s license. He’s a New Yorker.” I keep my face just as straight. It’s great fun, having a staff. Between the likes of Alexa and now Soren, I’m learning all sorts of new ways to amuse myself. “Also, what do you mean by sent word? Was she tossing carrier pigeons out of the plane while we were flying? Using Morse code? Activating the bat-signal, what?”

Soren clears his throat loudly, glaring at me. Then, he turns to Lachlan again. “At least now when her royal evilness interrogates me about the validity of your relationship, I won’t have to lie. Clearly, you’re soulmates.”

I stifle a laugh. Meanwhile, Lachlan looks like he’s blushing. “She already spoke to you?”

“Spoke to me. Threatened my life and the lives of my unborn children. I think I have to give her one if I tell a lie. I can’t be sure though. It all happened so fast.” He makes a face.

This time, I don’t hold back my laughter. Even Mo starts to giggle in her seat, for no reason other than she knows something is funny.

“Great.” Soren looks less pleased and more outnumbered. “I can see our bro time dwindling down to nothing already.”

“You two have bro time?” I’m intrigued. Abbas and Chase are the ultimate bros, but I’ve still never heard them refer to themselves as such, or their time together as anything other than just...well, life.

“We don’t have bro time,” Lachlan says, starting to wave his hand to dismiss the notion when he sees Soren’s displeasure increasing tenfold on his little red face. He really is sort of adorable in a porcelain doll sort of way with his pale skin prone to rosy cheeks, big marble-like blue eyes and perfectly tousled red hair on his head of delicate but distinct features and all sitting atop a fragile looking petite body several inches shorter than mine.

“Eleven years we’ve been together,” Soren says sourly. “And never did it feel like a job. Until this very moment.” Then he smirks. “Seriously though, where do you two rate on the codependency scale? Is it going to be a plus-one thing every second of every day until the love bubble bursts?”

“We’re definitely not that kind of couple,” I confirm. This time, I’m completely serious.

“Because I heard you two were sucking face like you might be,” Soren insists.

“Can we not call it that?” Lachlan frowns. “We’re not twelve and more importantly, we’re talking about affection I share with my fiancée. It’s not some spin the bottle game at a middle school party.”

“Fine.” Soren agrees. “I’d rather talk about how quickly there’s going to be a wedding. You do plan on marrying before your father’s birthday? Right?”

“We hope to get married as soon as possible,” Lachlan says, sounding very rehearsed for a line we’ve never discussed before now.

“So, that’s a yes.” Soren grins, his fingertips practically dancing over his kneecaps with excitement. “Backup Apsel is going to lose his mind.” He leans in a bit, eyes widening. “He doesn’t know yet. About any of this. He’s been at Carriage Cottage since yesterday afternoon when her majesty, the Maniacal, heard from her network of spies that you couldn’t go through with giving up Princess Monroe. Word is, he’s been celebrating his assumed victory.”

Most of what I heard in all of that comes down to two words. *Princess Monroe*. Mo is a princess.

“Why have you been letting me call your daughter a two letter nickname all this time?” I slug Lachlan in the shoulder. Not hard enough to do damage, a mild slug. To get his attention and convey my outrage.

But he hardly seems as bothered. He even smiles. “Because I love that you call her Mo.”

I shake my head. "I need to get so much better at this royal business."

Soren shrugs. "You really just need to learn to fake it a few minutes at a time."

Lachlan chuckles. "That's all Soren does."

"Dude," Soren starts to laugh as well, "Sometimes, I think that's all *you* do."

For a moment, I let myself believe them. Almost hope that it's true. That Lachlan really is just Chase's brother behind all the titles and fancy things.

But then the car stops, and the door is held open, and I watch Lachlan step out, emerging in front of his family's castle. And he's every bit a prince, from his perfect smile, to the royal shine I know must burn from the core of his being.



LACHLAN

GREER PLACES HER HAND over my arm, allowing me to guide her up the winding stone steps to the main entrance, and it's the first I've ever seen her nervous. I never take for granted the first impression this place makes, with its strong, tall pillars reaching five stories up past balconies and massive mosaic windows, to a tile roof littered with turrets. Most people find it intimidating. I did. For years. And yet, somehow, I didn't think Greer would.

"It's just a really big house," I whisper, trying to move my mouth as little as possible while we speak. "But it has all the same stuff in it as any other house. Bedrooms. Living rooms. People laughing. People fighting. People changing diapers. People waking up with huge pimples on their chins."

She muffles an unexpected laugh with her hand, and I tilt my head down toward hers slightly. "True story."

"I don't know," she says wistfully, head dropping until her soft curls meet with her back and her eyes stare up at the structure in its entirety. "I feel like there may be things inside these walls I'd never find in any other house I've been in."

"It's possible that's true," I admit, pausing to listen for Monroe behind me. One of the things I miss most whenever I leave the U.S. and come home, is being the one to do all the basic, simple acts of parenting. Like getting her out of her car seat and walking her up the stairs. Here, it's not proper for me to bother with such tasks and I'm forced to rely on help from nannies. Tonight, at least, it's Yvonne. Of all three women who usually care for my daughter, she's the one I trust the most because she's the only one who openly smiles at her. And talks with her as if she's a real person and not some fancy doll only meant for display. Like right now, I can hear her matching my daughter's bubbly tones as they greet each other after being apart this past week.

Greer must notice my efforts to check in on them without letting it show, because she tugs my arm a little closer and whispers, "I like her. I think I'll trust her with Cheese."

I bite the inside of my bottom lip to stop from chuckling. We're steps from walking inside and any signs of human emotion, especially those of delight, are frowned upon by my stepmother. Of course, the second we step inside, every desire to laugh fades without additional effort on my part.

"Welcome home, your highness," Gisela says with a curtsy as she holds the door for us.

"Thank you, it's good to be back," I lie easily, plastering the appropriate amount of a smile on my face as I move past her through the foyer and toward my parents, both of whom seem to have been eagerly awaiting our arrival despite the late hour, if clearly, for vastly different reasons. "Mother," I say, greeting her with a cordial nod before my father engulfs me in an exuberant hug.

"I've thought of nothing but the moment I could do this since the second you told me the wonderful news," he says, sounding every bit as excited as he claims. "Congratulations, son. I couldn't be happier." I can't help but feel he's overcompensating just a tad for the lack in joy my stepmother is likely to express next.

"Apsel, please," she hisses at my father under her breath. "Is it really necessary to cause such a scene here in the foyer over news which seems more delayed than celebratory." She casts her glare in my direction, sweeping past Greer in the process as if she isn't even here. "After all, your younger brother has been married for two years now. One would hope you could give up your bachelorhood and grow up *before* you reach your thirties."

"You don't feel fatherhood qualifies as growing up?" Greer says, taking a step in, moving both closer to me as well as my parents, as she does. "Your majesty." She adds it like it's an afterthought. And like she intends for it to sound that way.

My stepmother freezes. Stuck between her burning desire to lash out and remind Greer of her place and remembering Greer's place as my bride and future queen forbids it, she slowly raises her pointy chin, allowing her snobbish gesture to talk for her before she bites out, "You must be the infamous Greer. Every bit the delight we were expecting you to be." She folds her hands in front of her waist, confirming she's reached the end of her efforts to welcome Greer. "Tell me, young lady, do you have a last name to go with the first? Or are you a one name headliner like Madonna. Or Cher."

"If you'd give the boy a moment, I'm sure he'd get to proper introductions, Myrna," my father cuts in gruffly. I almost wish he hadn't. It only now it occurs to me, I have no idea what Greer's full name is.

"Quite alright," Greer carries on, likely suspecting my ignorance. "I'm perfectly happy to answer Queen Myrna myself." She smiles sweetly at my father, then adds a level of haughtiness as she faces my stepmother directly. "I can't deny Greer captures my identity perfectly, and should I ever be a headliner, I'll certainly consider the one name route if for no other reason than I'd adore being in league with the likes of Cher and Madonna, however," she pauses where most would for breath, but I know Greer, she can talk at least another forty-five seconds or so without needing an inhale. "As it seems, for now, my life is better suited for the more traditional given name I'm already known for." She smiles a little wider. "Greer Philladora Deluca."

"Philladora," my father says, lighting up all over again. "What a wonderfully unusual name."

"I was named after my grandparents, Phil and Dora. They passed away when my mother was young, long before I was born. It was my father's idea to honor them this way," she explains, the pride in her voice impossible to miss as she speaks of her father.

"It's a lovely tradition, isn't it?" my stepmother chimes in again. "Being named after your ancestors. My husband, the king, was named for his father, and his father before that. It's why we chose to name *our* son, Apsel as well."

"My mother thought it was a stupid tradition. Said she'd waited since she was seven to have a son and name him Lachlan, and she wasn't being cheated out of it by some dead royal's liking of the name Apsel hundreds of years ago." I smirk. Myrna hates this story, even if it is the only reason she was free to name my brother as she did.

"I'm with your mother on this one." Greer squeezes my arm, drawing my eyes to meet hers as she smiles. "I mean, Apsel is a perfectly fine name, but you're so obviously a Lachlan." She giggles in a way I've never heard her do. "I can't even look at you and imagine calling you Apsel. It just doesn't suit you."

"No," my stepmother snips. "It does not."

“Explain yourself,” a shrill voice demands from the foot of the stairs at the very edge of the foyer. With all my stepmother’s antics, I didn’t even see her come down. Honestly hadn’t expected to see her at this hour.

“Grandmother, so good to see you.” I release Greer and hurry toward the stairs to greet the matriarch of our family. She’s hardly happy to see me, but she’ll still gripe about it for days to come if I don’t make a proper effort to meet her where she stands. She has every bit the strength and mobility required to make the trip, she simply doesn’t feel she should have to. If she wishes to speak to four people standing across the room, she wishes those four to come to her. Years of being the queen have left a lasting impression of privilege.

“Don’t try to sweet-talk your way out of this,” my grandmother scolds before I even reach her side, finger wagging threateningly at my face. “How dare you request a hand in marriage when the owner of said hand is a woman no one in your family has ever met, let alone heard of.”

“It is because of how long she has known my family, and how very much they’ve heard of her and love her, that I knew requesting her hand in marriage was not only the best thing for me, but for all of us. Including Linden,” I say smoothly. I was hoping someone would make this very argument. I was expecting it to be my stepmother, but this is just as well. “You see, it’s only this half of the family she’s meeting for the first time. Please,” I offer her my arm, “allow me to introduce you.”

She refuses. “I’m not meeting anyone tonight. You’ve been traveling since morning and I want to meet your future wife when she’s at her best. Undoubtedly, after hours on an airplane, she’s not at this time. There’s only one opportunity to make a good first impression, Lachlan, and I don’t intend to deny your fiancée hers. Especially not when all the cards are stacked against her to begin with.” She sniffs. Then she raises her chin in the same haughty fashion I know Myrna must have learned from her and turns to start back up the stairs which I accept as my cue to return to my original spot in the foyer.

“I better go see to her,” my stepmother fusses, hurrying past me to follow her up the stairs. “I’m sure all of this unsettling news has upset her.”

My father watches them both until they reach the top and turn off the long hallway leading toward my grandmother’s personal sitting room where they will undoubtedly drink their tea to calm their nerves for sake of sleep, all the while trying to come up with all the worst possible things they could say about Greer and me and our engagement.

“Don’t mind them,” he says when he’s sure they’re out of earshot. “They’re surrounded by people who follow orders so much they tend to forget those we don’t pay, don’t have to live as they say. Least of all, those we count as family.” He cups a hand over Greer’s arm, smiling in his usual warm way. “And you are counted now, my darling, Greer. You’re family. For better or worse, and as you can see, we have plenty of both.” He winks before turning toward me. “Truly, couldn’t be happier.” Then he hugs me one more time before making his way toward the hall across the foyer leading to the kitchens and beyond that, his den, his favorite space in the castle. He claims it’s because he can always smell some heavenly scent from something baking in the oven, but I suspect it’s more to do with the servants’ quarters lining the hall between the kitchen and his den, promising his wife, the queen, never ventures out there to see him.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

REER

G “So that was...*interesting*,” I mumble under my breath as we walk down the longest hallway I’ve ever walked in my life.

“I don’t think you’re using the word interesting properly,” he murmurs back.

“You two can whisper all you want, I can still hear you,” a third voice pipes up from behind us, scaring me half to death.

“Soren!” I gasp when I turn over my shoulder to find him lurking there, shadowing our steps. “How long have you been following us?”

He shrugs. “Caught you at the last corner. Was having a quick chat with Bea in the blue library to see if she knew who the reigning queen of terror has chosen to be your personal assistant.”

So many things trip me up on that answer. “Who is Bea? Why is the library called the blue library? Are there libraries in other colors as well, say perhaps, a purple library, or a green library? What is your deal with all the queen’s evil nicknames, and most importantly, did Bea have the answer you were looking for?”

I can hear Lachlan chuckle quietly at my side, though he does little else to engage in this bizarre conversation Soren and I are having. While we walk. Down the endless hall. A two headed beast with a one headed shadow. Alexa’s heavy-handed pour on the coffee refills all flight long is doing me no favors now. The only saving grace here, is that I have enough sense to keep the crazy locked inside for once.

“If you must know, and you seem to think you must, Bea and I used to date,” Soren hisses. Answering my first question in a way that only leaves me more confused.

“Do all your ex-girlfriends hang around the libraries of the castle?”

“The ones who manage the royal family’s personal staff, yes,” he returns snidely. “And while we’re on that, there are seven libraries in total, but only one is named for the color of its walls. So no, there is no purple or green library.”

“There is a Rose library,” Lachlan adds casually. “But it’s named for a person, not a color.”

“Why is this relevant?” Soren asks.

“Because I would have made a big thing about it later on if he hadn’t clarified,” I explain, trying not to show how impressed I am by how well he knows me already.

Soren blinks several times, gesturing his disbelief and frustration, before going on to answer my other questions. “As for the various titles I use to refer to her majesty, I find it makes her less terrifying if I give her ridiculous but frighteningly accurate nicknames.”

“Less terrifying for you?” I interrupt yet again.

“For everyone,” he snips, apparently displeased with my suggesting he’s the only one who’s scared of her, and that I might find that amusing. “Lastly, yes, Bea did indeed have the answer.”

This part of our chat does seem to draw Lachlan’s interest again. “Who is it?”

“Katia.”

Both men make a sour looking face. There aren’t too many ways to misinterpret that.

“Why don’t we like Katia?” I ask, secretly wondering if we will ever reach the end of this hall wandering journey. We take another turn and travel a mini flight of seven stairs, and still, no destination in sight.

“She’s my stepmother’s favorite tattletale,” Lachlan explains.

“She’s not even a proper assistant,” Soren adds. “She was hired as a laundry maid three years ago, but she did a much better job passing along the castle gossip to the queen of darkness than she ever did at folding linens, so she’s been promoted to various, more prestigious positions since. Depending mostly on where there’s gossip to be gathered and least on skill.”

“Good to know.” But I can’t care about Katia and her desires for dirt on me and our fake engagement anymore. “When are we stopping? I need to know. Right now. I don’t even care where we’re going, I just need it to end. I didn’t wear shoes for long distance hiking today.”

Soren makes a face like maybe I’m going to start getting my own stupid nicknames. Lachlan just laughs at me. Not the way he did before, when we were still the normal us. Now he does a new sort of laughing, it’s understated and less catching, but still just as sincere. “Monroe and I were booted to the East Wing when she first came to live with me because she cried at night. The East Wing was mostly retired before that, used only for tours offered to tourists on their visits here.”

“Oh.” I try not to show how troubling I find this information. “So, I’m going to have to make this commute on a daily basis just to get back and forth from our room and the main living area?”

“Your room,” Soren corrects.

“What did I say?”

“Our.” Lachlan doesn’t look at me when he says it. Doesn’t laugh this time either. “We’ll have separate rooms until we’re married.”

“The Ivory Suite has been prepared for you,” Soren says.

“Color or name?” Seems like a necessary question now.

“Color,” Lachlan says when Soren refuses to answer. “And it’s right across the hall from me.”

“Where’s Mo’s room?” I ask.

“The nursery was built in an adjoining suite to the prince’s quarter’s” a new voice chimes in. I swear, this place must have secret passages. Feels like people just pop out of the walls around here. “Your highness,” she says sweetly, bowing her head to Lachlan. “Miss.” She doesn’t bow to me, but I do get a lovely fake smile from her.

“Katia?” I guess. Or conclude. That feels more accurate. I did have enough clues to arrive here. Between Soren’s intel and the way she’s standing guard in front of my door. I’m assuming it’s my door. We’ve stopped walking, so I sincerely hope I’ve completed my required steps for the day.

“Yes, miss,” she says, still displaying the same creepy smile she gave me when she greeted me. “I see Soren has been kind enough to foretell of my arrival as your personal aid.”

“Yes,” I say, nodding. “Soren has been kind like that.” I take a deep breath, mentally assessing all the ways in which we can move forward from this moment and if any of them will get me what I want. Into a room, without my shoes and bra, definitely without Katia, but with Lachlan. And preferably without Soren as well. We have so much strategizing left to do before morning, we really need every second of privacy we can get.

“Darling,” Lachlan says. Then, “Sweetheart.” When I still don’t respond, he opts for my name. “Greer.”

“Sorry.” I spin back around to face him, realizing my mistake a little too late. “It’s all just a little overwhelming, I think I zoned out there for a second.” I don’t generally enjoy using the ditz factor as an excuse, but right now I’m too tired to put in the effort for a better cover.

“I thought you might be,” he says gently, hand squeezing the one of mine still draped over his arm. “It’s why I was about to suggest you let Katia get you settled in your room so you can retire for the night.”

“That would be lovely.” This time, I’m quicker on the uptake. It may be late here, and my feet may be tired from walking, but the rest of me is still very much on eastern time, where it’s all of six in the evening right now. Which reminds me. “The kitchen down by your father’s office, is that the only one? Or do you have multiple here? Like libraries?”

“If you’re hungry, miss, I’d be happy to arrange for someone to bring you something,” Katia offers.

I look at Lachlan for a clue on how to proceed. I’d be perfectly happy to go fix myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich right now, but I get the feeling that’s not really an option.

“No need, Katia,” he answers on my behalf. “I’ve already made arrangements for a late dinner to be brought to her room.”

“You have?” I feel like Lachlan is surprising me a lot tonight. I’m not sure if I like it yet. Though, I can’t deny I like that I have dinner coming my way.

“He has,” Soren confirms.

Then, before I can find any other reason to stall and put off being alone with Katia, who frankly is starting to scare me a little with her non-stop fake smiling, I’m being ushered away, into my room, by Scary Katia. Also, Soren is already leaving his mark on me.

“Good lord, a girl could get lost in here,” I mumble to myself following Katia through the rooms as she gives me the grand tour. And I do mean grand. It’s beyond what I would call a suite. It’s like the sort of ritzy loft every New Yorker dreams of, but none of us can actually afford. And I mean loft in a literal sense here. My little Ivory Suite is a two-story situation, complete with two balconies, a master bath equipped with a Jacuzzi tub and sauna, a guest bath, a den, an insane bedroom with the most enchanting canopy bed beyond what even my princess-loving heart has imagined, and a formal living room. The walk-in closet alone is nearly as big as the apartment I share with Mal.

“Wait, is that a-” I can’t even get the words out, I’m so touched at the sight.

“A coffee bar? Yes, miss. The prince ordered it installed just this morning.”

I clutch my chest and sigh dramatically. “He really does love me.”

“It would seem so.” It’s the first I see the smile start to falter. “You’ll find your bags have been unpacked and your belongings stored in the appropriate places.” She pauses, as if to acknowledge what we both noticed while inside my new closet. The small wardrobe I packed only made the empty space look that much larger. “After seeing how little you brought, the queen made an appointment for you with Simon Sidka. He’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“Who? And Why?”

“Simon dresses every member of the royal family. There’s an image to uphold, after all. And Simon will assure you are able to meet those standards in your personal presentation.” The fake smile returns, magnified by a hundred. “I took the liberty of putting up your pictures on the nightstand.” I brought the same two framed pictures I’ve had beside my bed all of my adult life. My father and me in front of his shop the day he opened it. I was five. And the other of me and my childhood friend, Brice, the first I ever made. He died in a car accident just a few years after my mother left. We were eight. “However, no one was quite sure what to do with that,” she says snidely, pointing at the carrier entrapping Cheese for the last several hours. It’s been left sitting on the floor next to the door leading to the guest bath, as if someone was tempted to take him in there and flush him down the toilet to return him to the sewer, but then thought better of it.

“Cheese would have been the easiest one to unpack,” I say happily. And I’m genuinely happy because of what I’m about to do. “See?” I bend down, open the little door and out he comes, scurrying off across the floor to explore. “All done.”

Katia looks positively horrified. “Miss, you can’t just let a rat roam the castle.”

“I can’t?” I tilt my head a bit, cocking a curious brow at her. “Can you actually tell me I can’t do something?”

Her mouth flattens uncomfortably. “No, miss.”

“Fantastic.” I pick up the empty carrier and go to stuff it into the hall closet which I notice is mostly for throw blankets and spare sofa cushions. Cheese’s travel house will fit in here perfectly fine. “And not to worry, Cheese stays close to where his supper is served. He’ll never even leave the suite.” Never is perhaps a stronger word than I should use, but only on rare occasion has he ventured across the hall to Chase and Abbas’s place, and he’s certainly had ample opportunity to leave our floor all together, given our doors are always swinging open and shut. So, I’m okay with being bold here. Plus, I think Katia needs it. Her skin seems to get paler the longer we talk about Cheese. “His name is Cheese, by the way. He answers to it. Sometimes. But he always comes for oatmeal. The food. Not the word. You can’t just shout out ‘oatmeal’ and expect to see him come running. He has to be able to smell it to make the effort.” Her expression continues to morph even after I stop talking and I can’t help but think of Lachlan and the first time we met. “Also, my name is Greer, not miss. Much like Cheese and the word oatmeal, ‘miss’ is not going to conjure much reaction from me.” I pause. “Talks a lot of crazy’ Greer. That’s what my friends call me behind my back. I don’t answer to that either, but I thought it might help you make a little more sense out of me, which you seem to need help with since you’re staring at me like one of us is losing their mind and you’re not sure which one of us it is.” Then it’s my turn to smile sweetly.



LACHLAN

“OKAY, TELL ME THE TRUTH,” Soren says, all of thirty seconds after we’re inside my personal quarters and safely isolated from prying eyes and ears. “What’s the whole story with you and Greer?”

I keep walking to the coat closet and take off my shoes and jacket, placing both inside before I answer him. “I thought you didn’t want to have to lie. Risk of losing your firstborn child and all.”

“Look at me,” he says, both hands splayed out at his sides. “I think we both know I’m not passing these genes on to anyone.” I start moving again, this time toward the sofa. Soren is on the move again as well, coming over to join me here. “Go ahead. Make me lie. We both know you need me in the loop to pull off whatever you’re about to pull off.”

He’s not wrong. Part of me knew I would wind up sitting here with him tonight, filling him in on all the details I couldn’t share over the phone because my stepmother has all the staff’s phones bugged, for security purposes according to her. One of the maids tried to get a second phone once, a personal one, for private calls, something she should have been well within her right to do. The queen didn’t think so. The poor woman was fired on the spot.

“If I tell you,” and I’m on the verge of deciding to. Part of me still thinks I should talk it over with Greer first. After all, we’re partners in this. “You won’t just face being fired if it falls apart. You’ll be an accessory to fraud. And I may be safe from consequences, but we both know, you won’t be.”

Soren’s not swayed. “If your plan ensures you’re king instead of Backup Apsel, I’ll risk whatever’s necessary. Make me an accessory. Please. For our country, I would consider it an honor.”

“Apsel wouldn’t run the place into the ground, you know. And he’s not likely to go out and start a war or tank the economy, being as his mother’s so fond of money and the family’s wealth can’t be

maintained if Linden's isn't," I point out all the reasons his dramatic antics are a little hard to buy into. "You'd survive here, even if I wasn't king. Better still, if you're not in jail."

"I'm not going to jail," he dismisses the very thought of it. "Whatever you two cooked up is obviously already working. I'm just going to shadow the whole operation in case there's some unexpected hiccup, a job which I will do whether you tell me what's going on or not, but which I will be a hell of a lot better at if I know what lies we're trying to tell and where the truth could screw things up with said lies."

It's about what I expected his take on things to be. It's part of why Soren has been with me all these years. His loyalty is unwavering. And not just because he despises the queen and went to school with Apsel whose friends bullied the shit out of him. We've become genuine pals over the years. Best friends, even. He would be here, asking to help, whether he was on my payroll or not. Which is why I owe him this truth, even when I know it could hurt him down the road. If the roles were reversed, I'd expect him to tell me too.

"Greer is Chase's neighbor," I start slowly. "She nannies by day, which is how we started spending time together. She was helping me with Monroe while I was there." She helped me so much more beyond her nannying skills, but that's not relevant here. "She was watching her for me the day I went to meet Triston." Outside of McKenna, I haven't told anyone the details of this encounter. Figured the less people that knew the better. Less chance of any of it ever coming back around to Monroe someday. "He seemed like a nice enough guy when I showed up."

"But?"

"I don't know. It was little stuff at first. He wouldn't call Riley by her name, just kept calling her 'that chick'." That did more than just rub me the wrong way. Several times, my fist came close to leaving a lasting impression with his walls and punching things has never been my first instinct. "It was more of the same when we started talking about Monroe. Then it was, 'the kid'. He wouldn't admit to having any ties to her one minute but then denied needing a paternity test the next. Next thing I knew, he was asking about money. How much he was going to get if he stepped up and said *the kid* was his." I remember just staring at him for what felt like forever, seriously trying to talk myself into believing that I heard wrong. That I misunderstood. Hell, that I made it up because secretly, I wanted him to give me a reason to walk out of there and never look back. "When I went to pick up Monroe after, I was still reeling from everything. Greer could tell something went wrong. She practically forced me to dump my whole life story on her." I'm lying. It was easy to tell her. I wanted to tell her. And I've never wanted to tell anyone.

"And then she agreed to marry you so you could keep your kid and eat your kingdom too?" Soren's idea of getting serious is to make as many jokes as possible.

"More like she suggested it. Volunteered herself and then insisted I take her up on it." I go back and forth on whether or not it was right for me to let her do that. Time will tell, I suppose. If she gets hurt in all of this, regardless of what I gain along the way, I'll never be alright with it. "She's an actress," I add the last detail that helped me rationalize my way to a yes when she first made her proposal. "I've essentially hired her to play a part. She'll get paid in the divorce. And then that will be the end of it. She'll go back home, and we'll move forward here."

"She's a good actress." For some reason, Soren doesn't sound like he's joking this time. Not that what he said should have been funny. But then that doesn't tend to stop him from delivering it like it ought to be.

"She is," I agree. "And she's quick to improvise. Thinks fast. She's already gotten us out of a few sticky spots." Which reminds me. "Now that you know everything, I have a first task for you."

“Let’s hear it.” Soren rubs his hands together, eager to be an active participant in our scheme. “Anything you need.”

“Greer and I haven’t had much time to go over our backstory, personal history, things that will likely come up in conversation. We were planning to cover everything on the plane –“

“But then the queen of unholy terror stuck Alexa on you and made it impossible,” he finishes.

“Exactly.” I glance sideways toward the door and the suite across from it. Almost fitting she’s wound up across the hall from me again. “And now we have Katia complicating things.”

“Say no more,” Soren says, standing from the sofa. “I already have a job that will keep her busy until morning.”

“Oh, yeah?” I know a lot of things happen behind the scenes around here that I’m not privy too, but I’m having a hard time imagining a chore that’s so pressing and so time consuming it needs to be done from now until morning. “What is it?”

He grins. “A personalized map of the castle, complete with all the important routes Greer will need to know, markers noted along the way to help her navigate and a special section dedicated to all the names of every member on staff along with the various parts of the castle she is most likely to encounter them.” He teeter totters on the soles of his feet, tipping forward and back as he goes on, “I’ll tell her you ordered it. That you insisted it be done by the time our newest royal wakes up to help her feel more comfortable in her new home.” Then he stops his swaying in place and heads for the door. “I’ll have her out of the room by the time your food comes. I trust you can roll your own cart across the hall?” He’s out the door, pulling it shut behind him before I can answer.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GREER

G I tried several things to persuade Katia to leave me and tend to other things, starting with setting Cheese free to roam the suite. It definitely left her unsettled, but not so much so she was willing to abandon her queen-assigned post to watch me like a hawk. Which she did, even when I stripped naked in front of her and spent several minutes walking around completely nude, while chatting to her about the importance of airing out one's lady parts.

When nudity and TMI did nothing to make her voluntarily remove herself, I got dressed. And then started to sing. Loudly. And horribly. I'm a fine actor. I'll never make it on Broadway though. Still, she stayed, all the while smiling that creepy smile. I had to forfeit that round too when she decided to compliment my singing. I can accept when I've been outplayed.

But I come back stronger. And I did tonight as well, begging her to come sit with me on the sofa so I could take her through my Instagram feed, starting at the beginning. Seven years ago. It was all under the guise of getting to know each other better, of course. At first, she seemed excited, like she'd somehow tricked me into giving her intel she wanted all along. Then she saw what I was posting seven years ago, and the excitement faded. I was really into shoes back then. Not any I wore. Other people's shoes. Stranger's shoes. I thought I was on the verge of some massive social experiment, taking pictures of the shoes on strangers and posting them, encouraging the world to 'walk in someone else's shoes' for a change. It never went anywhere, mostly just got me some weird looks from people while riding the subway.

I scroll through a good twenty to thirty pics of shoes with Katia, recalling each pair as best I can, and embellishing when I can't, but she hangs in there with me. Isn't until Soren shows up, tells her he has orders from the prince, and she needs to come with him, that she up and leaves. Just like that.

"I'm going to use that," I mumble to myself. "Anytime she's up my ass, I'm just going to say, 'the prince ordered you to back the fuck up'." Then I laugh at myself and toss my phone across the sofa into the cushions. Even I can't stand the sight of any more shoe pictures.

I'm still taking my first sobering breaths, relishing my peace and privacy, when there's a knock at the door, announcing yet another intruder.

But I'm expecting food. So, I jump up from the couch and run to the door.

I'm not disappointed when I open it.

"You're my favorite new person," I say, beaming up at the young man with the food cart. Everything is covered so I can't see what he's brought me, but I can smell it and the heavenly scent coming from this cart is more than promising.

"Thank you, Lady Greer," he says, sounding surprised but pleased. "Would you like for me to set this up for you inside your suite?"

"I would very much like that," I tell him. "I would also very much like to know your name. Unless of course, you'd like me to keep calling you Favorite Person, which I think suits you, but which my fiancé might get bothered by over time."

"Frederick, miss," he says, rolling the cart inside as soon as I step out of the way, "and where would you care to dine tonight? Over by the window, perhaps? The moon is full and would make for a spectacular view."

"I would care for that just fine. Thank you, Frederick."

It only takes him a minute to secure the cart in place and arrange a chair for me to sit at just the right angle while I enjoy my meal. Then, just like that, he's rushing from the room again. Clearly, not one of the queen's favorites.

"If you need anything else, just ring me. I'm on duty until sunrise." He smiles, pointing at the phone placed on the hall table just feet from the door. I didn't even notice it before now. "Star seven will connect you with the service phone in the kitchen."

"Good to know." I smile back, waving as he scoots backwards out the door, sliding the door along as he goes until it meets gently with the frame again, the lock clicking into place as it settles.

I take another deep breath, this time to inhale all the yumminess. My stomach responds loudly, reminding me just how hungry I've gotten since we landed, and Alexa stopped coming around with trays of food every thirty minutes.

Eager to have a peek at everything Frederick brought, I make my way to the temporary dining space so beautifully set up for me. My hand is on the first cover, about to reveal the first dish, when another knock interrupts me.

For a moment, I just stand here, waiting. I'm not expecting anyone. And anyone I'm not expecting, I'm not sure I want to invite inside at this point. Pretending I'm not home probably won't work the same way here as it does in my apartment though.

"Greer?" Lachlan's voice is muffled by the door, but unmistakable. "I'd bust in the way you're accustomed to, but the doors to the suites all have privacy locks on them that require a key from the outside."

More good information.

"Coming," I rush to the door and open it. Then, so he doesn't get any ego-inflating ideas about my hurry to let him in, I spin right back around and run back to where I came from. I don't even take the time to wait for the door to open and greet him, just yank the handle back and make a run for my food. I'm nearly in position to pick up where I left off in my grand food reveal when the sound of squeaking wheels turns my head away from my dinner yet again. Though, I'm not bothered. "You brought more food."

"Thought we could eat together," he says, rolling his cart until it's even with mine and pulling up a chair to the other side of it, so we can sit across from one another, like at a real dining table. "Figured we could take advantage of the privacy."

I nod, forgoing a verbal answer until after I see what we're eating. "Is that oatmeal?" I'm not complaining, but I can't deny I had higher expectations of the royal kitchen crew.

"It is," he says, having a seat before he moves forward with unveiling his dinner. Of course, he ordered it, so the element of surprise isn't there to motivate him the way it is me. "It's for Cheese," he adds when he notices me still staring at the small bowl.

"Oh!" Could he be any sweeter? "For a second there I thought that was my dinner." I laugh with relief, finally sinking down into my own chair. Suddenly, I'm not as eager to find out what he ordered for me. Something about hearing he remembered Cheese's fondness for oatmeal, makes me certain I want to savor every aspect of this dinner. Including finding out what each cover is hiding.

"Soup." It's bright orange and smells of a sweet and savory heaven.

"Butternut squash. It's a specialty of the chef's and Chase mentioned you like pumpkin everything, so I was hoping this was close enough to qualify."

"Definitely qualifies." I smile, taking another deep breath of the delicious scent before dipping my spoon into the creamy liquid and having a taste. Once I do, I don't say anything for several bites. It's too delicious to interrupt with words. Only when I'm halfway through the bowl, do I decide to slow

myself down by adding in conversation again. “You mentioned needing a key to get in. I can’t help but notice no one gave me one and that Katia was the one to first open the door and let me in.”

He nods. “Katia will have a copy. It’s not ideal but it’ll be more of a hassle if she doesn’t have a way in and out of this room.” He points across the room toward the door and the small table with the phone. “There’s a small drawer on one end. Extra keys will be in there. You should find three. One for you, one for me and one spare.”

“Do I get a key for your room?” I ask. It’s a kneejerk reaction more than a genuine interest in having access to his private space. If he gets a key, I want a key. It’s as simple as that. And yes, I know it’s not particularly mature of me.

“My room and Monroe’s,” he answers naturally, as if he has no qualms about giving me free access to him and his most personal belongings at all hours of the day and night. “What?”

“Huh?”

“You’re making a weird face. And your spoon has been resting halfway between your mouth and the bowl for an unnerving amount of time now,” he says, pointing his own empty spoon at my full one, nearly overflowing with orange cream.

I have my soup first. Then I address the expression. “I guess I’m surprised you’re so willing to hand over keys to both your rooms. I mean, you have to know, I’m going to use them.”

He smirks. “I just spent a week with you busting in and out of places without so much as knocking. I think I know I waved all rights to privacy just by inviting you to come to Linden.”

I want quite badly to have a defensive comeback here, but I’m coming up empty. “Fair point.” I slide my empty bowl to the side and examine the next two dishes within my reach, both still covered and a complete mystery to me.

“Go with the left,” Lachlan nudges. “Trust me.”

I have no reason not to. So, I do as he suggests. “What am I looking at?”

“Roasted peppadew peppers filled with garlic and goat cheese and drizzled with the chef’s signature balsamic reduction,” he gives me the formal breakdown like he’s the maître d’ and this is part of his nightly spiel for every guest at the castle. “I went through a mild addiction with these after I had them for the first time. Consider yourself warned.”

“Will this addiction be enabled until I recover on my own, or will I be made to go through withdrawals and suffer?” I ask, holding my first pepper between my thumb and pointer finger, on the verge of popping it into my mouth.

“It will be enabled,” he confirms, grinning as he chomps down on a peppadew pepper himself. “Now,” he says, still chewing. “Since you’re going to be busy with those for a few minutes, and your mouth will be otherwise engaged, I’m going to use this opportunity to say some things.”

I’m in peppadew heaven. But I put that on hold for a second. “Things?”

He takes a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolds it, smoothing it out on the corner of his makeshift table. “I made a list of things I think we need to cover before we do any more interacting with anyone else.” He holds it up for me to see. It’s long. And his handwriting is a mess. I can only piece together every other word or so.

Already moving on to my next pepper, I gesture with my free hand for him to continue.

“I’ll go over some basic castle information first. You won’t have to remember word for word, and you can’t possibly have anything to contribute, so listening should be easy.” He pauses, like he knows I’ll want to add something here. I do. Or I would. If I wasn’t so thoroughly pleased with how these damn peppers feel on my taste buds. So, I keep my mouth shut, lest any of the yumminess fade if I open it.

Satisfied with my silence, he goes on, “Obviously, there are no set hours during which you may or may not be out and about, but, after ten at night, security does tend to be more sensitive to any unexpected activity. I tell you this only so you don’t think a demon is after your soul, should someone approach you and talk to you in the dark. I know how easily you get confused, even in daylight.” He takes another moment to revel in my silence, which I almost break, but don’t because I put two peppers in my mouth at once this time and opening my mouth could mean risking losing some. And a snarky comeback isn’t worth that kind of sacrifice nor is it worthy of the lasting image that would likely stay with him if stuffed peppadew peppers came oozing out of my mouth.

“Same as there are no hours off limits, there are no rooms you can’t go in.” Then he amends the statement. “Outside of private quarters obviously.”

I nod. That one does seem obvious even to me. Not by my personal standards, but just based on what I now know about the doors being locked from the outside, I probably could have deducted that one for myself.

“Having said that,” he continues, “there are plenty of rooms you will be expected to stay out of. My grandmother’s favorite sitting room on the second floor and my stepmother’s music room which she doesn’t use for music, for example.”

“What does she use it for?” I force out before I eat my last pepper.

“Spying.” He shrugs, like it’s just that simple with her. Apparently, she has no other interests. “The room is centrally located to give her the perfect view of every other part of the castle. A really in-depth view, thanks to the state-of-the-art telescope she had brought in there. She claims it’s for birdwatching, but she can’t tell a blue jay from a cardinal, so it’s hard to even humor her on that one.” He grins again. “Though it is pretty humorous to ask her bird related questions as if you honestly believe she has the answers. Or finds them even remotely interesting.”

“Duly noted.” I rest against the back of my chair. I ate a lot of yummy things super-fast, and I need a moment before I can move on to the next great dish.

Lachlan takes notice. “Alright, your turn to do some talking.”

“What about your list?” I remind him.

“The rest is all questions.” He starts to hand it to me, but I put my hand up to stop him.

“Yeah, I can’t read that. Might as well just ask me what you want to know.”

And he does. All through my pre-dinner break and even through the main course (a delicious Cajun style pasta) and dessert (a bread pudding to die for). We cover birthdays and middle names. We talk about childhood pets and hobbies. He had a dog named Charlie. I played the oboe. And the piano. And the drums. All for a month or less. We discuss traditions and favorite holidays. The places we lived growing up. Growing up without my mother. Growing up on two different continents with two different families. We reach adulthood. First heartbreak. Last relationship.

By the time we’re having after dinner coffee, we’ve reached favorites across the board.

“Favorite movie of all time,” I ask, having just revealed my favorite color is green.

“Don’t judge.”

“I’m like the least judgmental person ever,” I insist, taking a sip. “Now spill. As your future wife, I need to know these things.”

“Fine,” he surrenders, but he looks genuinely uncomfortable about it. “Robin Hood.”

“That’s not even embarrassing. What’s not to love about Kevin Costner?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not that version.”

I get a little more serious. Personally, the Prince of Thieves version is the only one I find worth mentioning. “Which one? Russel Crowe?”

“The one with the fox.”

I get a little less serious again. “Like, the animated one?”

He grins, but not in a way that would lead me to believe I’ve just been had. Just like he’s admitting to something truly ridiculous. And also, like he has no idea how adorable that makes him. “I can’t help it. I was obsessed as a kid. And to this day, I still sit down and watch it anytime it’s playing.”

“I bet you make Mo watch it just so you can claim she’s the reason it’s on,” I tease.

He laughs. “Guilty. Did it just last week. Of course, Abbas and Chase both called me out for it.”

“Even Abbas knows?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. He’s been Chase’s best friend since high school. He’s one of the few people in life who actually knows the before and after.”

“Before and after?”

“Me,” he explains. “The me before I came to live here, and the me after I became a full-time prince.”

“Are the two really that different?” I ask, though part of me already knows they are. I saw it the second we arrived in front of the castle and he stepped out of the car. Everything about him changed. From his smile, to his posture to the very energy coming off him.

“They have to be.” He sounds almost sad, but he forces a smile and tries to shift it. “Or maybe they get to be. I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like a relief to get to go back and hang around Chase and Abbas, and others it feels every bit the honor it is to come back here and do the job I was raised to.”

“It’s a big responsibility,” I say quietly. “I’m sure it wears on you. It would wear on anyone.”

“Yeah.” He lets out a laugh, but he doesn’t sound at all amused.

“What?”

He starts to shake his head, then stops. “It’s just...I think it’s part of why I haven’t been out there. Dating. Looking for a queen.” He flashes his eyes dramatically at that last part. “Apsel’s wife was born into this world, same as my stepmother. But I don’t think my brother married for love any more than my father did.”

“Why didn’t they?” I ask. It’s something I’ve wondered ever since I met the king and queen. It was easy to see how Lachlan’s father would have fallen for his mom once upon a time, but seeing him with the wife he has now, it’s made me wonder what their relationship is really like when no one’s watching.

“My father did. The first time.”

“With your mom.”

He nods. “He was a lot like me, put most of his time toward what would one day be his work. He didn’t have any younger brothers chomping at the bit to see him dethroned, so there wasn’t much pressure on him to be married.” He smirks at his own joke. “Then he met my mother in the most random way possible – he spilled soup on her.”

“What?” Another story I’ve never heard.

“Yeah.” He smiles and I can tell he’s fond of this tale. “Back then, he volunteered at soup kitchens at least once a month. That one Saturday, that one July, my mother was passing through on her travels, when one unlucky day of having her backpack stolen, her wallet left behind on a ticket counter at the train station – which she later got back – and winding up arriving here in Linden just in time to walk out into a thunderstorm with no money and no clothes beyond the shorts and t-shirt she was wearing

that day. With nowhere to go, someone was kind enough to direct her to the nearest soup kitchen for a meal and a chance to get dry.”

“The soup kitchen your father was volunteering at,” I surmise.

“Yep. The very one. Of course, her unlucky day seemed far from done with her when she held her empty dish out to be filled and instead wound up with scalding hot lentil soup being poured down the front of her shirt.” He laughs. “Apparently, my father took one look at her, and got too dazed to focus on anything but her. Thankfully, the soup mostly just ruined her shirt and left a mild burn on her stomach for a day or two. Nothing she couldn’t easily forgive once they started talking. Apparently, his sense of humor was quite charming.”

“How long before she found out he was a prince?” I ask, sensing it didn’t come up right there on the spot.

“They dated for three weeks before he finally told her.” He stirs his coffee thoughtfully even though he hasn’t added any new sugar or cream since he first fixed his cup. “He said she was the first person who ever saw him just as he was. And that was hard to give up.”

“Did it change when she found out?” I can’t imagine it would have. I’ve known his mom for years. Chase’s dad is a mechanic, owns the shop, but still. She’s not the sort to be hung up on things like titles or money or fame.

“It didn’t change because she found out,” he says slowly, “it changed because he brought her home, to the castle, to his family. And who he was when he was with her faded into who he needed to be when he was here. And who he needed her to be for him, wasn’t the same as who he needed her to be for everyone else.” He sighs. “She didn’t want to be both.” His shoulder bounces sadly. “Said she didn’t know how to be one without losing the other. She said she would have sacrificed who she was to be queen for him, but he wouldn’t let her. Because he loved her too much to lose her that way.”

“So, he let her go.” This story took a sadder turn than I was expecting it to.

“He said it was the greatest heartbreak of his life, the second greatest was standing right in front of her and realizing she had let herself go to stay.” The corner of his mouth curves gently, but the hurt in his eyes is enough to cause an ache in my own chest.



LACHLAN

I CAN’T BELIEVE I TOLD her that story. I’m not sure my father’s ever even told anyone other than me. And he only shared it then because he knew how badly I needed to hear it.

“Do you think he ever got over her?” she asks, biting her lower lip, eyes glossy like she’s fighting back tears.

“No.” I shake my head, pulling myself up to sit a little taller. “She was the love of his life. Still is.” I sigh, getting to the part of the story I know will leave a bitter taste in my mouth. This part at least, I’ve spoken out loud many times before. “My father’s marriage to Myrna was essentially arranged. They both agreed to it, obviously, but their parents made the connection, organized their courtship which was polite and a proper year’s worth. My father just wanted to be practical. Didn’t want to risk hurting someone the way he’d hurt my mother. Myrna knew what she was getting into.” I tilt my head toward my shoulder. “Sort of. I think she was of the misguided belief that I would stay in the states and that any child of hers with my father would grow up to be king.”

“Well, I can kind of see why she’s so put out about it all now,” Greer says, twisting up her mouth like it’s causing her physical pain to sympathize with my stepmother in any way. “Her marriage was a

business deal and she's not getting a proper return on her investment."

"No one promised her she'd bear the heir," I point out.

"Still. She obviously believed she would when she agreed to marry your father." She sighs. "I'm not saying she got screwed or anything, but I can kind of see how she's not the evil stepmother in her version of this tale."

I smirk. "Perspective is everything."

"It really is."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GREER
“Good morning, miss,” Katia chirps somewhere in the distance. Or what I wish was in the distance. If I can hear her, she must be somewhere in my royal loft. That’s what I’m calling my suite. The royal loft.

“It can’t be morning,” I grumble, rolling over and smushing my face into my pillow. “And if it is morning, there’s certainly nothing good about it.”

“Breakfast will be arriving momentarily, miss.” Her voice is getting closer. Definitely not distant. “I told them to deliver it promptly at seven as we have a full day ahead, and I’m sure you’ll want to be out of bed and at least have a robe on before one of the service boys from the kitchen arrives with your tray.”

I can feel a chill hit the back of my legs and instinctively jump up to snatch my blankets back. “Katia, if you ever do that again, I will have to insist you give back your key. I don’t care how inconvenient it will make both our lives. At least one of us won’t wind up dead.” I glare at her, just in case she’s not clear on whose life hangs in the balance right now.

“My apologies.” She tucks the blanket back around my legs and feet. “It was only my intention to help.”

Now that I’m awake and apparently staying that way, I scoot up until I’m sitting properly while still in the comforts of my lush down bedding. “Let’s talk about the best way to do that then,” I say, blinking dramatically, prying my eyes wider with every open, forcing myself into a state of being awake I don’t quite feel yet. “I’m not at my best first thing in the morning.” In case that wasn’t obvious yet. “You’ll do much better to wake me from another room. Maybe a wake-up call? Or even easier, just tell me when you want me up, and I will happily set an alarm.”

She looks confused. “You want to set your own alarm?”

I point at my phone sitting on the nightstand to my left. “Yeah. I have a handy little app on my phone. Pretty standard. It’s the clock. You can use it for all sorts of neat things. Telling time. Timing things with a stopwatch. Or setting an alarm.” I wait to see if this helps at all. “The extra neat part is that I don’t have to worry about hurting its feelings if I yell at it for waking me. And I won’t kill it or throw it or break it in any way, because I paid a lot of money for it and I never get the insurance and I’m not due for an upgrade for another seven months.” I sigh. “You should know I talk a lot when it’s early and I haven’t had coffee. Some people would think that I’d talk more after caffeine, not the case though. Way worse before.” Katia’s still frowning. “I also make way more sense after coffee.”

Finally, something seems to click for her. “I’ll go make coffee.”

“We’re going to need to get better at reading between lines and picking up on subtle hints if this is going to work, Katia,” I call out as she hurries from my bedroom and down to the coffee bar.

She’s barely out of the room when I hear a knock coming from downstairs. “Food.” I plop back into my bedding. It doesn’t feel like it’s been nearly long enough since I stopped eating dinner. By the time we polished off the last of our dessert, had coffee, went back for the last dinner rolls we skipped for more important things like peppadew peppers, and then finally said goodnight, it must have been nearly four in the morning. On Linden time. In New York it was barely ten at night. Which is why I couldn’t sleep, even after he left. Possibly also because of all the coffee. And sugar. Neither great late-night consumptions when one is meant to be adjusting to a new time zone. But I had other things

on my mind last night, things I felt were more important than sleep, though now I'm having second thoughts about that having only accumulated maybe two hours' worth of shuteye.

"Breakfast has been set up for you to enjoy in the sitting room," Katia squeaks from next to my bed. I must have dozed off because I didn't even hear her come back in. "Coffee will be done momentarily. Shall I get your robe for you?"

I don't bother sitting up again. Or opening my eyes. I've had a thought. "Actually, I'll take breakfast in bed, please. With coffee. No robe."

There's a moment of silence before she manages to oblige me. "Of course, miss."

"Thank you, Katia." I sigh again. This time, a fabulous feeling spreads over my mouth, leaving a smile in its wake. It's not half bad being engaged to a prince. At least not when you remember you're the one meant to be giving orders, not taking them.

After breakfast, Katia offers to run me a bath before my meeting with Simon Sidka, which I assume is her polite way of suggesting I find a way to meet with soap and water. I'm inclined to agree it's necessary, but I opt for a shower instead, and handle all the water running on my own.

Last night, it seemed sort of humorous to me that my fashion sense was called into question prior to anyone even seeing any of my clothes. This morning, as I'm flipping through the meager hangers holding my wardrobe, most of which I stole from Mallory, I'm feeling the pressure to pick out something this Simon Sidka won't completely judge me for. Then, after rejecting every option available to me the third time, I remember I'm not being judged. My character is. And more specifically, my character in Mallory's clothes. There's nothing here to take personally. Just more opportunity to explore my new role and let my character's story arc continue to evolve. Right along with her look. But my hair, that they're not touching.

After deciding on a slate grey pant suit and pinstripe blouse paired with sleek but simple black stilettos, I stroll out of my fantasy closet, through my bedroom and down the stairs. I feel a burst of confidence strutting my nearly royal stuff for all of ten seconds. Then it's snuffed out by the sight of the queen sitting on my sofa next to a man who looks like he could be Heidi Klum and Cindy Crawford's love child. I swear he has the same genetics that make flawless features and ageless beauty both supermodels seem to be made of.

"Her majesty has graciously offered to sit in on your meeting this morning," Katia says cheerfully, meeting me at the foot of the stairs.

"How very generous," I say, smiling and offering a small curtsy to the queen before I approach the man I assume is Simon Sidka. "Mister Sidka, I presume?" I extend my hand to greet him. "Such a pleasure to meet you. I can't tell you how excited I am to see what you've brought me today." Just out of the corner of my eye, I can see at least three clothing racks on wheels. I have a sneaking suspicion there are more lining the hall outside my royal loft.

"Miss Deluca, I'm just delighted to meet you. And please, I insist you call me Simon. As soon as I heard Lachlan was engaged, I knew the castle had gained a true princess. Nothing less than pure grace and kindness would have won his heart." He smiles warmly and I decide instantly I adore him. "And I'm the one who's exited. Look at you! You're stunning. Dressing you will be one of the greater pleasures of my life!" He claps his hands, apparently brimming with the thrills of getting to handpick my wardrobe for the foreseeable future.

I notice Queen Myrna looks a bit put out over his enthusiasm. Apparently, Simon notices as well because he hurries to add, "Of course it will be third to the honors of dressing you, your majesty and the young duchess, Isobel."

Isobel. That must be Lachlan's sister-in-law. It's the first time I've heard her called by her name.

“Just to even be counted among women of your caliber will be the highest compliment I could hope for,” I say in my most charming voice. “Simon, please let’s not waste any more time. I can’t wait to see the beautiful garments you’ve brought with you today.” I clasp his wrist gently. “And please, you must call me, Greer.”

He smiles, placing his hand over mine. “A true princess indeed.”

Once the trying on of clothes portion begins, Queen Myrna is a lot less silent looks of disapproval and mostly just vocal declarations of distaste and dismissal. We go through all three racks I saw, plus two more from the hall (I was right about my suspicions) before we finally find an outfit she approves.

I hate it.

It’s by far the least flattering thing I’ve put on this morning. Don’t get me wrong, it was perfectly fine on the hangar and I’m sure, would be gorgeous on plenty of bodies, just not mine.

I sense it’s why the queen has a such a liking for it.

“Your majesty,” Simon starts, clearly struggling for the most tactful ways to disagree with the queen’s choice, “in my professional opinion, I must admit, I don’t believe this is ideally suited for the lovely Greer.”

“Simon,” Queen Myrna says, chin lifting, eyes casting down at us over her pointed nose – a magnificent task when one considers she’s seated and we’re both standing. “As the prince’s fiancée, Greer has a certain standard to uphold. It does not include looking lovely. It requires looking regal. And modest. And above all, is not meant to draw attention, as said attention is reserved for the prince.” She smiles. But it’s the sort of smile that turns your stomach and makes you gulp down a nervous lump in your throat.

“I think we all know my fiancée could wear a paper bag and still look lovely enough to draw every last set of eyes away from me,” Lachlan’s voice catches all of us off guard. Apparently, he’s making use of his key to my room already. “Also, I refuse to be seen in public with you if you wear that,” he teases me, coming in close to slink an arm around my waist and press a kiss to the side of my head. We agreed last night, somewhere between coffee and dinner rolls, a certain level of affection needed to be exchanged on a consistent basis to keep things believable. Holding hands. Embracing. The occasional kiss on the cheek or forehead. Sweet things. Easy to enact things without getting caught up in any sort of passion or feelings of any kind. Which is extra important given how long we have to pull off this charade and the fact we will be in character more often than not until it’s over. It’s easier to keep lines from getting too blurred between what is real and what is pretend when certain things, like affections, remain similar to what they would be in our real relationship as friends.

Close friends.

Closer and more affectionate friends than I am with anyone else I know.

It’s not confusing.

“You’d be seen with me in a paper bag but not this dress?” I ask, feigning disbelief.

“You’re right, I take it back. I would proudly walk beside you, no matter what you’re wearing, darling.” Another thing we discussed. Terms of endearment. Darling was his choice.

“Always so charming, my love.” And that was mine. “But I actually do agree with you. I’m not stepping foot outside this suite in this dress.” I dare a glance at the queen, whose icy glare is sending chills up and down my body and not at all in a pleasant way. “With all due respect, your majesty. I’m afraid it’s just not the right fit for me.”

“Simon,” Lachlan cuts in again, leaving the queen no chance to respond. “You’ve had enough time with my beautiful bride to finish up without her, haven’t you? I came in here hoping to steal her away for a bit.”

“Steal away, young prince. I don’t wish to stand in the way of love,” Simon says, taking a step back to literally clear the path for my escape. “If your beautiful bride to be trusts me to complete her look and put together her new wardrobe, I promise to do my best not to disappoint her.”

“I trust you completely, Simon.” I move in close enough to give him a hug. “Your taste has proven to be sublime, and I can’t wait to see everything you choose for me.” I make sure to say ‘you’ as often as possible. Just so there’s no confusion regarding my lack of interest in having the queen contribute her opinions on fashion to the selection process.

“Your highness,” Katia pipes up, “I’m so sorry, but I don’t seem to have you on Miss Greer’s schedule for this morning.”

Lachlan smirks, taking my hand and tugging me playfully toward the door. “Yes, Katia, I’m aware. That is part of the stealing her away bit I was referring to.” He winks at me, then looks back over his shoulder at her. “You can go ahead and pencil me in now. Say, until about three this afternoon?”

“Three?” She sounds beside herself and I can only image the array of unpleasant meetings and duties she had lined up for me between now and then.

“Yes, Katia. Three. And not a moment sooner.” He holds the door for me and ushers me through, placing his hand tenderly on my lower back. “Mother, always a pleasure.” Then the door swings shut and we’re rushing down the hall, me on the verge of surrendering to a fit of giggles. Him, nearly completely in control of his amusement, but for the twitch of his mouth and the sparkle blazing in his eyes.



LACHLAN

ONCE WE’RE OUT OF HER room, I make sure we don’t slow down until we’re in the elevator. The service elevator to be more specific because it’s one my stepmother refuses to use and therefore cannot catch us on.

“You’re quite good at the whisking away, Prince Lachlan,” she says, still trying to stifle her giggles. “I only wish I could have somehow stayed in the room a second after we left to get the full effect of Katia’s expression.”

“I’m sure Simon will re-enact it for you if you ask. He’s quite good at mimicking the lot of them.” We’re both staring straight ahead, anticipating the doors opening on the next floor, but our hands are still locked as one, and her other hand is draped around my wrist, a move I can’t help but feel isn’t part of the act, but simply a natural reaction to being in close quarters with me.

“Oh, I’ll definitely be asking him then.” She hiccups. Then giggles again. “Also, where are we going?”

“To scout wedding locations,” I tell her just as the doors glide open and Soren steps in to join us.

“I see the rescue mission was a success.” He nods at Greer to greet her.

“It was.” She smiles, moving in a bit closer to give him more space. The service elevators aren’t exactly made to the same dimensions as those for regular use, so three people does start to make you think sardine can. “How did you guys know I needed rescuing anyway?”

“Petra told me,” Soren answers. Then, he’s kind enough to elaborate before Greer can explode like a waterfall of questions. “Petra is the maid on your floor, and as such, it’s her responsibility to

tend to your room, which means, she's privy to your schedule. See, maids are a lot like ghosts around here. You can feel their presence, but you can't really see them. In order to maintain her ghostly status, she has to know all your comings and goings to best manage her time in and out of your suite. To anticipate when you'll need dishes cleared, or your bed made, or your covers turned down, or the sitting room straightened."

"I get the picture." She waves her hand for him to move on, then apparently gets hung up on another thought, "Also, there are ghosts in the castle?"

He ignores her and carries on as if she never posed another question. "At the start of her shift, Petra gets a digital copy of your day sent to her directly from Katia. And then, because she's cool, she forwarded said digital copy to me." He grins. "Apparently, she heard from Frederick in the kitchen that you were kind, but naïve. And definitely needed looking after. So, when she saw what the queen of gruesome had in store for you, she acted."

"Good lord, what did she have in store for me beyond that hideous dress?"

Neither Soren nor I get to answer her yet. The doors slide open yet again. It's our turn to exit.

"Are we in an underground parking garage?" Greer hisses as we step out of the elevator.

"It's the royal garage. And it is underground." I shrug. "So, sort of."

"It's creepy," she whispers, folding in closer at my side. "One family shouldn't have this many cars."

"This is where the staff parks," Soren explains. "The royal cars are parked along the back wall. But only the most frequently used ones that the drivers need access to. There's a second floor, down below, where the rest are stored."

"Whose car is that?" she asks, pointing at the small, green Citroën Entourage we're approaching.

"That's mine." Soren dangles his keys for show.

"But of course, it is." She grins.

"That better be the extent of your commentary or I'm not planning future rescue missions on your behalf. And trust me, you're going to need them if the days to come are anything like this one."

Greer zips it for the time being. She doesn't even make a peep when it falls to her to cram into the backseat, given her shorter legs and petite frame.

Only when we're all inside, engine humming in a high pitch that ought to worry us but doesn't faze Soren, as we zoom through the security gates toward daylight and public roads, does she resume the pursuit of her curiosities.

"Seriously, though," she says, one hand on the back of each of our seats. "What was on that schedule?"

"Well, let's see," Soren starts, as if he's trying to recall the most heinous parts first. "There was a food tasting scheduled in place of lunch where you were meant to try all of Linden's most traditional meals, none of which have been served in about a hundred years, at least not with the intent of consumption, because they're disgusting."

I can see her scowl in the rearview mirror.

"You had etiquette lessons lined up before that," I inform her.

"Rude!" she gasps. "I'm perfectly skilled in etiquette."

"You released a rat into the castle," Soren points out dryly.

"Not the whole castle," she argues. "Only in my suite. It's not like he's going to leave. Trust me. He's not the active sort of rat. A steady stream of oatmeal and he's not going to go any farther than his next best napping spot."

"I'm just saying, by the royal wench's standards, bringing a rat doesn't invoke a sense of confidence where your levels of etiquette are concerned." Soren laughs to himself. The fact Greer brought Cheese has been amusing him non-stop since he found out. He just keeps muttering the word 'genius' under his breath over and over, whenever he has a second to dwell on it.

"Fine, the rat thing could confuse someone who isn't familiar with Cheese and his habits," Greer concedes. "What else? Or was that it?"

"It was not," I tell her. "You also had appointments to take a guided tour of dead men portraits or as it is more officially known, The Kings of Past Gallery, which you were going to be quizzed on after."

Soren nods. "I saw the test. There was a note to make you repeat it until you could remember all the kings' names and the years in which they reigned over Linden."

She snorts. "That couldn't have been too hard. Aren't like half of them named Apsel?"

I laugh. "I guess you would have had that going for you."

"Make jokes now, but you're probably not getting out of that test in the long run," Soren tells her. "I have a feeling the queen of eternal torment has plans to make you fluent in all of Linden's history. It would be just the sort of torture she could inflict on you under the guise of showing support for the future queen."

"If that's all she's got, I'm not worried." She even relaxes enough to slip back into the seat and drop her hands into her lap. "I happen to like history and reading and learning, and as far as my memory's concerned, it's pretty strong given I'm in the habit of learning new lines on a regular basis."

"Lines?" Soren asks.

"Cut the crap, Lachlan told me he told you."

He glares at me. "Do you tell her everything?"

"She's the one I had a secret with that I told you about. Why are you mad?"

She pops back up to stick her head between us, this time leaning in closer to Soren. "Eh-ve-ry-thing," she whispers dramatically in his ear.

He tries to brush her off, but she's too fast and already flopping back into the backseat, laughing to herself.

"Do you remember where you're going?" I cut in before he can come up with a retort for Greer. I have a feeling this back and forth will be a constant with them. I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I like how easily she's fitting into my world. On the other, it's bugging me how naturally she's getting on with Soren. And I know the reason it's bugging me is an altogether bad reason. Because I'm jealous. And that is obviously not an appropriate reaction to have when faced with my fake fiancée making friends with my oldest friend in Linden.

"Of course, I remember where I'm going," Soren scoffs.

"Then why didn't you turn left at the last intersection?"

He makes a face. "Because I forgot where I was going," he grumbles, flipping on his signal to turn around. "It's all her fault. She's distracting me."

"I'm sorry," she says, sounding not remotely sorry, "I didn't realize you didn't have the brain capacity to drive and talk at the same time. I'll bring a book next time I know I'm getting in the car with you."

I turn back, frowning at her. "I'm still here. You can talk to me." Yeah. Definitely jealous. And apparently, not doing anything to rein it in either.

"You haven't really done much talking. I wasn't really sure what the extent of Soren's personal assistant duties entailed. Kind of seemed like conversing on your behalf was part of it given how

things have been going since he joined us.” She shrugs, smirking.

“He doesn’t talk for me. He just talks a lot,” I point out the obvious. “So, it makes it seem like he’s talking for me.”

“I don’t have to talk at all!” he slams the palm of his hand against his wheel in a tantrum fit for a three-year-old.

“Might be best, since it’s interfering with your driving,” Greer deadpans. “Also,” she says, tapping me on the shoulder as if to make sure I’m the one who answers her next question, though I think that’s a given. Soren doesn’t look like he’s talking again to either of us anytime soon. Actually, his face is turning so red, I’m wondering if he’s putting off breathing as well. “Where exactly are we going to check out this wedding venue? And why are we going in Soren’s car? I thought we had to leave the castle with security and drivers and such.”

“The place we’re going is a private residence, so no security required. And Soren’s driving may leave much to be desired for, but the inconspicuousness his car provides does not.”

“Ahhh.” She nods. “Whose private residence?”

“Gerard’s.” Then I wait.

“Why are you being mean to me? You know that one-word answers do nothing for me.”

I bite back the smile fighting to conquer my entire face. “Gerard is the castle’s head gardener. He’s been in charge of every blade of grass and every flower petal on the property since before I was born. And he just so happens to have the most magical property in all of Linden.”

I can see her face relax into a satisfied smirk in the mirror. “See? That was much better.”

I sigh. Everything really is much better. Now that she’s here.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GREER
“There you are! I was starting to worry you’d hit a snag in your great escape,” Lachlan’s dad greets us as we get out of the car. He’s not alone. Walking right beside him is an older gentleman with white curly hair that encircles his head like a wreath and a bushy beard doing much of the same to his mouth. His dark, sun-loved skin glows with the warmth of his smile and spirit, and his eyes have a kindness in them that makes me miss my father instantly.

“Your dad was in on this?” I hiss to Lachlan before we reach them.

“It was kind of his idea,” Lachlan whispers back. “Well, coming here to hide out was. Plus, he pointed out it would give us all a chance to move forward with wedding plans without Myrna’s input.”

“Wow.” I’m almost starting to feel bad for her.

“No snag, Dad. Just Soren’s driving,” Lachlan teases as he reaches his father and gives him a hug.

“Your majesty, I assure you, my driving was perfectly safe,” Soren jumps in to defend himself.

“Just your sense of direction then that was causing us problems,” I add, stepping toward the king to greet him with a curtsy. “Your majesty, such a charming surprise.”

“Greer, I must insist you call me Apsel and that you stop all formal gestures at once.” Then he looks around almost nervously before amending his statement. “Well, maybe best to stick to formal procedure when the queen is present. But when in private -”

“Apsel it is.” I smile.

“And this, my dear, is Gerard. My oldest and wisest friend. And, as it happens, the most talented man I know.” Apsel puts a hand on Gerard’s shoulder, giving it a friendly shake and smiling broadly. “Gerard, meet the beautiful woman who’s claimed my son’s heart, Greer.”

“It’s an absolute pleasure,” Gerard says, taking my hand and bringing it to his mouth, briefly brushing his lips over my skin in a kiss. “I’m so honored to have you here and welcome you to my home. It would be the greatest delight of my life if you chose to exchange your vows here.”

“The pleasure is mutual,” I tell him, returning his sweet gesture with a soft squeeze against his palm before releasing his hand. “And the honor is ours. I hear your home is absolutely magical.”

“Well.” He bows his head in a humble fashion. “It’s home to me. But I’ll let you decide how magical it is when you see for yourself.” Then, he offers me his arm which I happily take, before he starts to turn, gesturing for the other men to follow.

At first glance, the house appears simple and small. Only once inside, taking in every detail, do I start to understand its magnificence. It’s been built around the trees that stood here long before the house. Three large oaks in total, all tall and strong and ancient, bringing life to his home in a way I’ve never experienced. It’s like the trees are whispering to us. The leaves rustle as we walk past, and I swear I can feel the bark move as if eyes are following our every step, keeping watch in a loving, protective way.

All through the house’s structure, vines can be found trailing the walls and framing the windows. But the real magic is found when we step through the back door and into his garden. If it can be called that. It reminds more of a park. A botanical masterpiece spanning acres beyond the small house.

I make it three steps into the lush, green grass before I release Gerard to pause in place. I hear the tinkling sound of a small waterfall, see the colorful bursts of flowers in bloom and am welcomed by a flutter of butterflies flying overhead, and loudly declare, “Yes!”

Lachlan chuckles. "Yes?"

"Yes, I want to get married here."

"You haven't even seen the place," he says, his voice hinting of a tease.

"I've seen enough." Then I add, "I mean, I definitely want to see more. But I don't need to see more to decide. This is the place. This is where we need to get married." I sigh, taking it all in. "It's like straight out of a fairy tale."

"Then I suppose that makes it perfect for us," he says, his voice dropping an octave so only I can hear it.

And it hits me. For a brief second, I nearly forgot that's all this is. A fairy tale. A delightfully fictional story. And the happy ending of this one, won't have me in it.

"Yes," I agree quietly. "Just perfect."

"Would you like me to show you the gazebo I thought you might want to use for your vows?" Gerard offers, pointing ahead.

"Oh, it would be ideal," Apsel agrees. "How many different types of roses have you got growing on it now? Six?"

"Seven," Gerard says. "And I have plans to introduce an eighth, though I won't have time before the wedding." He looks to me and Lachlan. "When did you say you were hoping to get married?"

"Two weeks from Sunday," Lachlan answers. "We know it's not a lot of time, but we're eager to start our life together. And with father's retirement around the corner, and my coronation to follow, we don't want our wedding plans to get lost along the way."

"Not to worry, son," Apsel says, patting his shoulder. "We'll have everything celebration ready in plenty of time. You two lovebirds just pick the things you want to choose for yourselves, and I'll see to it, the rest is taken care of."

"With the location decided on, that can't leave much," Soren says, tapping at his phone, taking notes, I assume.

"Well, if possible, I wouldn't mind choosing my dress." As soon as I say it, I hold my breath. It would be just my luck for Linden's royals to have some sort of tradition in which the queen chooses, and after this morning, I'm certain that wouldn't bode well for me. Not that it should matter to me one way or the other how I look at this wedding. It's not like it's real. I'm not an actual bride. And Lachlan is not, in fact, my groom.

But it does matter. The more I think about it, it matters to me a lot.

"Your dress!" Apsel says loudly and I'm almost certain my worst fears are about to come true. "Remind me to have a call put out to Anke."

"Who's Anke?" I say under my breath as we start walking again, Lachlan scooping my hand in his just as we begin to move.

"My father's goddaughter. And also, one of Europe's most renowned wedding dress designers," Lachlan answers in the same tone.

"Handy."

"It would seem so." His mouth does the thing again it's been doing more and more ever since we arrived. It's like he's not allowed to smirk or smile or grin at will here. Instead, mostly, all I catch anymore are little twitches at the corners, or what looks to be him biting the inside of his bottom lip. And I can't help but notice how much I miss making him smirk. And smile. And grin.

"You'll also need rings," his father goes on in his loud baritone. "Lachlan, you and me, in the vault. Tonight, before supper. I want an official announcement complete with ring at the family dinner tonight."

“Yes, sir,” Lachlan promises. And I swear, I feel a soft pressure from his palm pressing against mine.

“What about cake?” I ask, forcing out the first words that come to mind. Anything to keep me from overanalyzing what may or may not have been intentional about the way he placed his hand against mine and whether it could mean something.

“Of course, cake would be at the top of your list,” Lachlan teases.

“You really do have an extreme interest in food.” Soren looks somewhat put off as he says it, eyes still focused on his phone. “No need to worry about cake. Celeste is already working on samples for you. Should be ready for an official tasting by Wednesday. I can sneak you down to the kitchen to discuss design options tomorrow morning if you want. We can use it as another excuse to pull you out of whatever atrocious activity your schedule is lined with tomorrow.”

“Works for me.” I look to Lachlan. “Did you want in on the cake action?”

“I’m afraid I have a full schedule of my own tomorrow. But I’m more than happy to trust your judgement on all matters concerning cake.”

My steps slow momentarily. If I weren’t semi-attached to him right now, I probably would have stopped. “You’re working on a Sunday?”

“Linden is alive every day, rain or shine, Monday, Sunday or holiday,” he says, and I can tell he must have heard the words a hundred times growing up. Probably every time he thought his father ought to be free but wasn’t. Due to being king and all.

“Anything I can join you on?” I ask, curious to see more of his world now that I’m in it. “Or just watch?”

“It’ll be really boring. I have meetings most of the morning, and everyone I’m meeting with has something they’re coming to complain about,” he says. I don’t think he’s actually trying to talk me out of coming along. It sounds more like he just finds it hard to believe I’d even ask to come.

“And they all want you to fix their problems?” I ask, brushing past whether or not I’ve lost interest in tagging along. I haven’t. I plan to be at that meeting. Sitting in the back, keeping quiet as a mouse, if I must, but I want to be there. I have an inexplicable need to see him in his element.

He shakes his head. “Not exactly. I’m more of a mediator. I have to negotiate between the different parties, look for solutions neither has considered, craft compromises everyone can agree on.” He slows down. “Sometimes I don’t have to do anything. Sometimes it’s just about everyone needing to feel heard.”

“And you give them that.”

“I try to.” He turns down to meet my gaze. For a brief second, a smile starts to form on his lips before it moves into something else. Something kind, but more understated. “Look,” he says, taking the hand of mine he’s still clasping in his and lifting it to point ahead.

“Wow.” The sight before me takes my breath away. “It’s stunning.” The gazebo looks like something straight out of sleeping beauty, only without the curse. But definitely, not lacking in fairy tale magic. “People must get married here all the time.”

Gerard chuckles softly. “You two will be the first.”

“What?” It’s the first time I’m able to pry my eyes away from the gazebo. And it’s only for a second, just long enough to gape at him in surprise. “Why? It’s the most romantic setting I’ve ever seen. I would think people from all over the world would flock to this very spot to celebrate the most romantic moment of their entire lives.”

“They might,” Gerard agrees. “If they knew about it.”

“Gerard’s magic garden is Linden’s best kept secret,” Apsel muses. “I don’t think I’d even know about it if I hadn’t stopped by to ask him where to find tiger lilies one desperate Sunday evening.” He laughs, and the soft sheen of memories covers his eyes. Tiger lilies are Lachlan’s mother’s favorite flower. I know because Chase gets her a bouquet every Mother’s Day.

“So, it’s set then?” Soren interrupts, looking up from his phone for once, finger still poised over the screen. “The nuptials are happening here? At the gazebo?”

“Yes,” Lachlan tells him. “It’s set.”

“Soren, are you our wedding planner and no one told me?” I ask, releasing Lachlan’s hand to move close enough to Soren to peek over his shoulder and see his phone.

“I’m not your wedding planner,” he says dryly. And I’m pretty sure, with a hint of disgust. “I’m not keeping track of these things to organize your wedding; I’m keeping track of them to organize everything that has to happen around it. Security. Media. To name the most important.”

“Oh.” But now I have another question. “Will there be a wedding planner though? Or is there no need for one given the staff you already have access to?” Maybe I had more than one.

“I’m sure my wife will call in the same woman who arranged for Apsel’s wedding to Isobel,” Apsel senior explains with an expression that leaves much to be desired for in terms of encouragement.

“It’s why we’re sorting out certain details ahead of time,” Lachlan reminds me.

“Right.” Location, dress and cake. All covered. “What is the standard expectation in terms of wedding party?” I move on to the next pressing thought bouncing to the forefront of my mind. “Like, how many bridesmaids and groomsmen are required? Expected? Frowned upon?” I always planned on Mallory being my maid of honor. Outside of that, I’m less attached to who else shows up in matching dresses.

“Four of each,” Soren says, though he couldn’t possibly sound less interested. “Isobel will be matron of honor and Lachlan’s cousin Genevieve will, of course, be invited to be a bridesmaid. There are other more distant relatives we can call on if you don’t have anyone you can ask.”

“Um,” I don’t even know where to begin with this one. Thankfully, I don’t have to.

“Isobel will have to settle for bridesmaid. Greer’s best friend, Mallory, will be maid of honor.” Lachlan looks back and forth between Soren and his father, both of which look like they’re on the verge of saying something to contradict this. “This part is non-negotiable.” Neither tries to argue after that.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He takes my hand as we all start walking again. “Of course.” He leans in a little closer. “Plus, I don’t think anyone could handle a showdown between Myrna and Mallory if we let it come to that.”

I laugh. Then I quickly move my hand to my mouth to quiet it when both Soren and Apsel turn back to see what the noise was.

“Where are we going now?” I ask when I notice we’re still heading away from the house.

“There’s an old barn over this way,” Lachlan fills me in.

“More like the skeleton of an old barn,” Soren says, arching a skeptical brow. “I’m not sure I get the appeal.”

“Soren, my boy, I’m not sure you’ll ever make progress with your romantic relationships if you don’t learn to see the world in softer tones every once in a while,” Apsel says, forever the sound of a laugh echoing in his voice.

Soren scoffs in response but remains silent otherwise. I can’t help but marvel at how differently people interact with Lachlan and his father when outside of the confines of the castle and without the

watchful eye of the queen keen on seeing them adhere to their titles' required formalities.

I notice the distance between us and the others widen before I realize Lachlan is intentionally slowing our pace.

"What's up?" I whisper, assuming we're on the verge of a secret meeting. "Did I say something wrong? Is there something about this barn I should know? Some sort of backstory that makes it significant to you?"

"Nothing significant," he says quietly. "Yet. Two weeks from now it'll have been the place our reception was held."

"And that will be significant for you?" I ask, trying not to read too much into it.

"The place you changed my life and solidified my future as king as well as Monroe's father? Yeah," he nods, turning to face me. "It'll be significant." His eyes are so serious and so full of gratitude, it hits me like a wave of emotions. Everything from giddy to terrified washes through me with a force that feels like it could knock me over.

"It'll be significant for me too," I tell him, hoping he'll think my breathy voice is for the sake of not being heard and not due to the emotions ravaging my vocal cords as I try to force out the words. "This may be the most meaningful thing I ever get to do, and there's no one else I'd rather do it for than you and Mo." His gaze moves from mine to the ground. "Was there something else?" I ask. It's not like him to look away unless his mind is on the move.

"It's just, I know we agreed this was a job for you and that I'll pay you for your time," he starts, eyes still wandering the garden that surrounds us. "But now that we're here, and we're going through the motions, and I'm seeing what Myrna will put you through, and how much my father is involving himself..." he sighs.

"Yes?"

"I'm just not sure anyone can put a price on what you're doing here," he says, frowning when his eyes finally meet mine again. Then he tries to make light of it, "I mean, you'll probably need therapy for years to come once this is all over."

I roll my eyes at him, shaking my head and letting my mouth hitch up at the corner. No need to give him the full spectrum of my delight. And I am delighted. He's worried. Concerned the emotional investment required to pull this off will be too high. Truth is, the longer I'm here, the more scared I am of that same thing. But now's not the time for truth. Now's the time for playing my part and easing his fears. "Lachlan, I know you spent less than a week with me, but you're well aware I've needed therapy since long before you came along." Then I pat his chest playfully with my free hand before I tug him along to catch up to everyone with the other one still firmly planted in his palm.



LACHLAN

BY THE TIME WE FINISH at Gerard's, we've made decisions on everything from ceremony to reception, including bridesmaids and groomsmen, color scheme and, this was the root of said color scheme, flower arrangements. Being as we were in the presence of the greatest gardener known to man, it seemed prudent to collect on his wisdom where flowers were concerned while there.

It's also time for lunch for which he head back to the castle. Despite Katia's efforts to intercept and take Greer away early, we manage to stow away in my room for a quiet lunch for three.

Well, four if you count Cheese. Which, Greer does. So, I suppose I ought to as well.

“Peppadew peppers,” she squeals the second she spots them on the table already prepared and waiting when we arrive. “Can we serve these at the wedding?”

“I don’t see why not,” I tell her, internalizing a smug smile of satisfaction. I was hoping she would react this way to the appetizer. “Though, overall, it might be easiest to let Myrna decide on the menu. We have to be picky about the things we are most desperate to keep her input out of.”

“Like my dress,” she mumbles, mouth full already.

“For example.” There’s a quiet knock at the door that joins my quarters to Monroe’s and a moment later, Yvonne is holding it open and letting my daughter burst into the room, running just as fast as her little legs will carry her. Straight to Greer.

“Hey, beautiful,” Greer says, squatting down to greet her with an exuberant hug that leads to both of them swinging back and forth while giggling loudly.

“I’ll be just in here when you’re ready for me to come back for her, your highness,” Yvonne says in her usual demure fashion. Every time she speaks to me, I want to tell her to treat me the same way she does Monroe, but I know my stepmother would have her fired for it, so I don’t.

“Actually, why don’t you go ahead and take a break,” I tell her instead. “No need to stay nearby. I’ll have Soren call you when we need you again.”

She looks surprised, almost nervous even. “I really don’t mind staying, your highness. Your schedule can be so unpredictable, I’d hate to be too far when you need me.”

“You’re too sweet,” Greer chimes in, “but it’s really not necessary. If the prince has to run out on urgent business, I’ll be happy to spend some one-on-one time with Mo.” Then she quickly adds, “Princess Monroe.”

“Mo,” I remind her. “For you she’s always Mo. No matter what.”

Yvonne looks like she might faint, but I don’t mind because Greer is beaming back at me in a way that takes my breath away.

“Your highness,” Yvonne squeaks, eyes wide as she curtsies and backs out of the room, pulling the door shut as she goes.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am that third setting on the table is for Mo,” Greer says as soon as we’re alone.

“Who else did you think it was for?” I ask, ushering both of them toward the table.

“I was getting so used to Soren tagging along everywhere, I just kind assumed it was for him,” she says, lifting Mo to help her into her seat.

“There’s a highchair accompanying the third setting,” I point out.

She just shrugs. “So?”

“That was mean.” With Monroe already seated, I pull out a chair for Greer. “Funny,” I concede, “but, harsh enough you might have considered saving it for when he was around and deserved to feel the impact of it.”

She smirks. “Not to worry, I have plenty more where that came from.” I help her slide her chair closer to the table before I make my way to the seat across from her.

“I think he likes having you around for a sparring partner. I don’t give him nearly as hard a time as he’d like me to.” I lift the bottle of sparkling water from the stainless-steel chiller keeping it cold and offer her some which she accepts by moving her glass in my direction and smiling.

Once our glasses are filled, and Monroe has a sippy cup of milk in her reach, we move on to our plates. Or Monroe’s plate, more specifically. Without even discussing it, we both begin to assemble her meal, both of us picking and choosing from the platters laid out.

“You remember what she likes,” I say, noticing the hefty portion of blueberries being piled onto Monroe’s plate.

“I’m a nanny, remember? Knowing who likes what and more importantly, what not, kind of keeps my life from hanging in the balance.” She grins. “Have you ever tried to give a two-year-old a side of carrots when said two-year-old hates carrots with the burning passion of a thousand lower levels of hell? It’s not pretty.”

“I have not,” I admit. “But I have tried to give a one-year-old some overcooked, mushy broccoli so I think I have an idea of what you’re saying.”

The first bite activated her gag reflex. After that, fistfuls of broccoli went flying across the room. Soren and I both had to duck for cover. He still wound up with mashed broccoli bits in his hair.

A few minutes later, Monroe is happily munching away on blueberries, plain macaroni and slices of cheese and apples, while Greer and I begin to enjoy our own, more grown up, versions of lunch.

I’ve barely had a bite when my phone begins to buzz in my pocket. “Sorry,” I mumble.

“It’s fine,” she says, smiling while she crunches away on a half-eaten slice of apple Monroe just shared with her. “Royal-ness doesn’t break for lunch. I get it.”

I nod graciously. Sometimes I think she’s too easy on me. Then I remember that’s the whole point of this exercise. To make my life easier. Not to make it feel real. “It seems the formal dinner announcement has been postponed until the week before the wedding,” I tell her reading Soren’s message.

She looks interested but not surprised. Can’t say I am either. “Any particular reason for the delay?”

“Best guess is the queen is hoping we’ll call the whole thing off before then. No official announcement to the family means no press release and no need to recant anything, should things turn in her favor.” I have to hand it to her, she’s definitely not rolling over to play dead on this one.

“Well, I hope she uses this time wisely and finds a way to come to terms with the inevitable.” Greer stabs her fork at the air for added emphasis when she announces with great finality, “because you and me, mister, are getting married!”

“That we are.” I chuckle quietly, turning my face down to look at my plate as I do. “At least this gives us more time to prepare for the big dinner.”

“Speaking of,” she asks, opening her mouth to accept a mashed blueberry from Monroe. “What exactly does an official engagement announcement over family dinner entail? Doesn’t everyone unofficially know already?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “Everyone unofficially knows. But you’ve met both my stepmother and my grandmother, you should know by now, unofficial is far from acceptable.”

She stabs at the air with her fork again. “Good point. Carry on.”

“The official announcement will include several elements,” I explain. “One, it’s a formal occasion and therefore we will all be formally dressed.”

“How formal?”

“Evening gown, full suit, formal.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” I thought it was a bit much when my brother made his announcement over Sunday brunch as well, but that’s how it’s done and so that is how we will do it.

“Is everyone going to be this dressed up? Or just those of us making official announcements?” She doesn’t look worried about being the only one overdressed so much as she seems to think everyone should be subjected to equal amounts of discomfort over dinner.

“Everyone will be dressed up. The unofficial news of our upcoming official announcement will reach everyone prior to dinner,” I promise. “Then, once we’re all present, I make a formal introduction.”

“I get to meet everyone again?”

“No, they get to meet you. I have to give a whole speech on all things Greer.”

She stops eating. She even puts her fork down. “Come again?”

“Are you worried I won’t have enough material?” I tease.

“No,” she says, looking entirely serious. “I’m just worried the material you have is less than appropriate.”

“What are you talking about?” I feign shock. “Nothing I’ve learned about you since the moment we met would ever give me pause about your abilities to charm your way into the royal family.”

She makes a face. “Just make sure you stick to the notes we made last night and skip over all the things you know about me through firsthand experience,” she grumbles.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think my grandmother would really take a liking to you if I told her I met you mid-burglarizing my brother’s refrigerator.”

“I was borrowing, not burglarizing,” she clarifies, glaring at me. “But if you really want to tell that story, I’m sure she’d be super impressed with you and your nakedness the first time we met. Very prince-like, growling at strangers while wearing nothing but a towel.”

I laugh. “I don’t know, I don’t think I’d tell it as well as you would.”

“Probably better save it for my first invite to tea with her then,” she quips. “You never know. A nice ice breaker like that might come in handy.”

“You must have high expectations of my Greer speech if you think you’re getting an invite to tea from the family’s matriarch,” I point out, still trying to subdue my amusement. It’s an ongoing issue I’m finding hard to control since we’ve been back. In New York it was easy to let myself be entertained by her, but here, smiling and laughing beyond what would be a polite gesture at the appropriate moment, is not acceptable, much like every other emotion.

“Lachlan, you don’t know me very well if you think I’m letting my fate with your family rest in your hands.” She smiles. “Your grandmother is getting so wooed by me so hard the next two weeks, she’s going to fall in love with me so deep and so fast, it’ll be done and over before she can even attempt to stop herself.”

“You know what? If anyone could do it, it’d be you.” Even as I say it, I know that it’s true. And somehow, realizing that makes this moment less amusing. Because I want that. I want my grandmother to love her. And there’s only one reason that would ever matter to me.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

REER

G When I return from my escape with Lachlan, Katia is clearly miffed with me. If I had to guess, and I do, because I'm not asking, I'd guess the queen took her frustrations over me and her thwarted efforts to torture me out on Katia instead.

"Simon left three dresses for you to hold you over for the next three days until the rest of your wardrobe arrives," she says, eyes glued to an iPad she has resting in her one arm while she uses her free hand to work the screen. "I've tried to reschedule today's tasks for other days, but Soren has inundated my inbox with the prince's requests for your presence. It's all highly unusual, miss. Her majesty will not be pleased."

"Won't be pleased with what?" I ask, just to be clear. "With my fiancé's desire to spend time with me?"

She looks briefly stumped. Then she goes on, "There's a certain protocol to be followed in a royal engagement. His highness, Prince Lachlan, is taking a lot of liberty in areas he best not. Especially given the rushed nature of your wedding." She raises her brows and flattens her lips. "It could give the wrong impression about things, you know. Hurrying to the altar. Dismissing time-honored family traditions to do so."

I narrow my eyes at her, warning her to think twice before she answers, but I keep my tone light when I ask, "What sort of wrong impressions?"

"The sort the prince is prone to leaving in his wake ever since her young highness, Monroe, entered his life." The corners of her mouth crinkle from pressing her lips together so tightly. It's a weird thing people do here. Insult the prince with an arrogant air of entitlement. Like somehow, Lachlan's choices make him less royal and therefore jabs at him are not just allowed, they're even appropriate.

"Katia," I start, initially intending to make my tone sound as sugary sweet as possible while I make some formal but insulting speech about her rude behavior toward the prince, but then opting to cut the crap. If I'm going to be here a while, I need an ally. Soren is great, but he's a loaner. I need one I don't have to give back. At least not until I have to leave. And give everything back.

I sigh. "Fuck it."

Katia looks like her eyes might plop out of her head. "Miss?"

"I'm calling a timeout," I begin again. "You and me. Real talk. No 'miss' or titles fit for royals. Just two chicks having a chat. Think you can handle that?"

Katia glances sideways toward the door as if she's scared any moment someone will come crashing through it to bust us if we're not following proper protocol at all times. She sniffs. Her mouth twitches back and forth with indecision. Then, finally, "Yes, I can do that."

"Good." I turn and start for the coffee bar. "I thought I smelled a fresh pot when I walked in. Was that you?"

"Yes, mi -,," she catches herself. "Yes. Soren let me know to always have some made for you."

"Soren." I chuckle to myself as I take a mug from the hooks on the wall. "Would you like a cup?"

"Is this part of our timeout?"

"Yes. But mostly coffee is part of everything, and I believe in sharing." I turn over my shoulder to smile at her. And not one of the weird fake smiles we've been exchanging since we met. I'm offering coffee, I don't get much more genuine than this.

“I would love a cup.” She smiles back, it’s more tentative than mine, but then she has more to lose here than I do. I think that’s the part I’m starting to understand most about her. I don’t think her constant seeking favor with the queen has anything to do with what she has to gain and everything to do with what she might lose.

“How do you take it?” I ask, placing a second mug on the counter beside mine. “Cream? Sugar?” She looks strangely taken aback. Just stares at me. Saying nothing.

“Katia, I realize here in the castle you’re accustomed to being in the position of doing the serving, but you can’t tell me no one has ever offered to fix you a cup of coffee before.”

“No cream. Two sugars, please.” She takes the last steps to reach the coffee bar and stand beside me. “You can’t do this with anyone else here,” she whispers.

“Do what?” I continue fixing her cup while I wait for her to explain. I have an idea of where this is going.

“Her majesty passionately believes that it is impossible to lead the people if one values being one of them. You have to maintain a dignified sense of separation. Always,” she hisses as if we’re having a secret conversation in a crowded room, not a private chat, alone in my loft. “If you don’t...” she can’t seem to bring herself to finish.

“She can’t hurt me.” I hand her the cup of coffee I’ve prepared to her liking. “I know she’s the queen of Linden, but in the universal scheme of things, she’s just a woman. Like you. Like me.”

Katia shakes her head. “She’s nothing like you.”

I pick up my own cup and have a sip. “If I offer you a seat on the sofa beside me while we drink coffee and chat, are you going to have a panic attack?”

“I’m going to politely decline and sit in the chair instead.” She points at the woefully uncomfortable antique high back chair carved from wood and provided with no cushions whatsoever placed at the corner of the sofa around the coffee table. It’s pretty, but I sat in it briefly this morning when the whole wardrobe fiasco was unfolding, and I’m fairly certain it was crafted for torture and no other reason. It went hand in hand with the designs the queen was trying to doom me to.

“That chair will require chiropractic help to recover from,” I tell her dryly. “But you’re a grown ass woman, it’s your call.” I take my seat on the sofa, still hoping she’ll follow suit. She doesn’t.

“If you lean forward ever so slightly and place most of your weight in the soles of your feet, it’s not so bad,” she explains, lowering herself into the medieval torture chamber.

“Wonderful. What better way to enjoy a nice, relaxing cup of coffee?”

Katia smirks. At least that’s something. She is familiar with sarcasm. “The coffee is wonderful, by the way. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” For a few seconds, we both sink into the peace that comes with a hot cup of joe. Then, with the comfort and warmth starting to spread through my body, I get back to business. “Here’s the thing,” I tell her. “You and me, we don’t have to be enemies in order to maintain our relationships with the people who are. All the royal conflict happening around us, doesn’t really have to involve us.”

Katia balances her cup on the top of her right knee, an extra challenging act when one considers she’s already holding most of her weight off the chair. “I don’t see how that’s possible,” she admits. “You’re kind of the center piece of the current conflict.”

“I am?” Obviously, I am. My swooping in to marry Lachlan at the last minute is what’s costing the queen her son’s shot at the crown. But admitting to knowing that is a level of trust Katia and I haven’t begun to climb to.

“Her majesty believes her son is the rightful heir to the throne, and she was certain she was well on her way to convincing the king of her beliefs in this regard.” She explains it so matter of fact, it’s hard to tell if she knows I’m aware of this situation or not. “Prince Lachlan’s sudden engagement to you has derailed her efforts, as being married will make him wholly eligible to take the crown again.” She sips her coffee thoughtfully. “You should know, she hasn’t conceded her claims yet.”

“Katia,” I say, raising my brows dramatically. “I was there this morning. I saw the clothes she tried to put me in. If that wasn’t emotional warfare, I don’t know what is.”

Katia snorts trying to suppress an unexpected laugh. “You shouldn’t make jokes.” She tries her best to look serious. Even if the expression fails, I understand the sentiment in her words. She’s warning me.

“You ever watch any American movies, Katia?” I ask, leaning back, smirking to myself.

“Of course.” She places her cup back on her knee. A sort of polite gesture she’s prone to every time I’m about to speak again, like she has to wait until I’m done talking to have another sip.

“Well, you know how there’s usually some badass, slightly crazy woman from New York no one ought to mess with because she won’t stand for any of their bullshit?”

Katia nods, though I can tell she’s fighting a frown.

“If this were a movie, I’d be that woman.” My cup is empty, and I stand up to refill it. “I’m not worried about the queen.” I stop at Katia’s side to see if she’s ready to have her cup topped off as well. She is, so I hold out my free hand to take it from her. “I don’t intend to underestimate her either,” I assure her when she hesitates to let me wait on her again. “And more importantly, I don’t intend for you to continue to suffer the consequences of my choices when they go against the queen’s wishes.” Katia continues to stare blankly at my empty hand. “Katia give me the damn cup.”

It’s in my palm so fast I nearly drop it.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, rubbing both hands over her thighs anxiously. I’m starting to think Soren’s comments about maids winding up in the mental ward weren’t the dramatic jokes I thought them to be.

I reach the coffee bar and start fixing both our cups again. “So, here’s what I propose,” I say in my most optimistic announcer voice. “Moving forward, you fill me in on all the behind the scenes torture I can’t see in the schedule the queen makes for me, and then, instead of running out on you and leaving you to be the messenger, who clearly does get killed around here - in theory, I’m hoping - I’ll go straight to the queen with my cancelations. That way you can come stomping in behind me, just as furious with me as the queen. And you know how misery loves company.” I add sugar to both our cups. “Plus, every so often, I’ll pretend to try to get out of doing something and let you convince me to do it after all. That ought to earn you some sort of hero points.”

Finished with our coffees, I head back to the sitting area and return Katia’s cup to her.

She looks only slightly less confused than when I left her. “Why would you do all of that? You don’t need to. Soren seems to be handling all your escapes as it is. If you let him, he’ll take care of it, so you never have to deal with her majesty at all.”

“I know.” I smile, having a seat across from her again. “But Soren’s job is to take care of Lachlan and taking care of Lachlan now means making sure I’m alright at all times. Which is great for me and Lachlan, but that leaves no one looking out for you.”

“I just don’t see why you care.” She frowns staring into her full cup of coffee like maybe I’ve hidden my secret agenda in the dark liquid.

“Then you don’t know a lot of decent humans, Katia.” I exhale loudly. This is taking longer than I thought it would. “Look, I don’t have anything monumental to gain here. It’s true. Soren can take care of the queen for me. But Soren’s not the one I’m spending all my time with here. You are. And I’d like

to think our time together could be friendly. Enjoyable even.” She looks up from the coffee, the frown still hooking her brow with healthy skepticism. “I’m not royal,” I offer my last play. “I don’t know the first thing about having staff who follows me around. Back home, the people I see day in and day out are my friends. I miss that.”

Katia starts to nod slowly. Her frown softens but her expression stays serious. “I have a daughter,” she says quietly. “She was born with a heart defect. She’s only three and she’s already had seven surgeries to try and fix it.”

My breath catches in my throat. I didn’t see this coming.

“I’m not married,” she goes on. “Her father left when she was just over a year. I think it was all too much for him.” Her gaze drops back down into her cup. “My parents help as much as they can, but all her medical care is expensive.” She looks up, eyes holding mine more boldly than they have since I’ve known her. “It’s why she chose me...the queen...to be your assistant. She promised my daughter’s care would be paid for life if I did as she ordered and helped her sabotage your relationship with the prince.”

I hold her gaze, waiting a moment longer to make sure she’s said all she wants to. “What will she do if you don’t succeed?”

“She said I owe enough to be sent to debtor’s prison.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“It’s an outdated practice, it’s rarely used. But I don’t trust that she wouldn’t.” She bites her lip nervously. “I’m scared. I want to do right by my daughter, and I thought I could do whatever it took to take care of her, but the things the queen is asking of me now don’t feel right either.”

“We’re going to make it right,” I promise without having the first idea how to deliver on my words. Lachlan will know though. “For now, let’s stick to the plan. Let the queen think she’s getting her way. Hell, I can play into it a bit more, act like I’m having second thoughts or that I’m unhappy with my new royal life, or something. You’ll see, I’ll come up with something. I’m an excellent schemer. I have the imagination for it.” I wink.

“Everything is going to be alright,” she repeats the words as if confirming them for herself.

I nod but choose to end this conversation here. “You mentioned new dresses?” After this latest revelation, and a week of the queen’s torture looming all while counting down the days to my wedding, I could do with a distraction and I imagine Katia could as well. Even if it’s for vastly different reasons. Unless she too is harboring secret feelings for a prince she’s fake engaged to and she’s only just now realizing how intense they are and how hard it’s getting to be to remember how everything is meant to be fake. Like the coming announcement dinner. And the official introduction. God only knows the wonderful speech Lachlan is preparing to make. I can’t begin to fathom how I will stop myself from soaking up every last word like the feelings moved straight from his heart out over his lips to my ears.

But given all I’ve just learned, I’m thinking that’s not the case for Katia.

“I took the liberty of hanging the dresses up in your closet,” she says, tone already sounding more at ease. “Her majesty had someone deliver new shoes for you as well while you were out.” She makes a face. “You might prefer to walk in bare feet though.”

My nose crinkles. “That bad, huh?” I push up from the sofa again. “Well, there’s no time like the present to face God awful footwear.” I stick my tongue out sideways and roll my eyes. Katia actually giggles for half a second. Then, our coffees in hand, we march upstairs and get down to business.



“SO, HOW’S IT GOING?” Chase asks the second I answer his call.

“Good. And you?” I briefly glance around to check out my surroundings. Monroe and I are taking a stroll through the royal garden. She loves walking from flower to flower and taking a deep inhale of each before giggling loudly, delighted with the scent. It’s a slow-motion stroll, but it’s one of the only occasions she gets to move around freely, and I try to make it out here with her at least once a day.

Thankfully, no one else finds her nearly as entertaining as I do, and so, as usual, we’re the only ones out here.

“I’m great,” Chase answers, snorting. “But I’m not faking an engagement, so we’re not wasting time with me. Get back to you. Tell me all the things I’ve missed.”

I roll my eyes and sigh loudly. Even long-distance it’s important to let Chase know he’s an annoying little brother. “You haven’t missed anything. We’ve only been gone a day and we’re doing exactly what we said we would. Nothing more. Nothing less.” It feels like a lie, but logically, I know it’s not. “I’m sure Greer has confirmed the same to you.”

“I haven’t talked to Greer.”

“What? Why not?” Somehow, I imagined she was facetimeing all three of them non-stop since we landed. At least when I haven’t been with her. Which admittedly, hasn’t left her with much time to facetime anyone, provided she sleeps, which I imagine she does.

“Probably because we see each other in person every second of the day and making phone calls to keep in touch is new for us.” I hear crunching and get a very vivid image of him sitting on his sofa chomping down on chips. “Are all three of you sitting in your living room downing bags of snack food and talking about me and Greer?”

“Yeah,” he confirms.

“I want proof of life,” I hear Mallory shout in the background. “Greer hasn’t answered a single text since she boarded that plane with you.”

“You got that?” Chase asks.

“I heard it.” I shake my head and move my phone away from my ear so I can check the photos on it. Switching to speaker while I scroll through them, I go on, “Any requests from Abbas while I’m in the mood to be accommodating?”

“Mostly he’s just wondering if we’re flying coach or first class to get to Linden.”

I find a shot I took of Greer at Gerard’s. She’s standing under the arbor looking beautiful enough to make my heart ache if I stare too long at the picture. It seems stupid somehow to send this one to Mallory, and yet, it’s the one I want her to see. Before I can overthink it, I send the text. Then I revisit Abbas and his flight concerns. “I told Soren to contact you guys about flights. Just be nice to him and I’m sure he’ll book first class for you.”

“Wait,” Chase sounds apprehensive at the news, “our flying fate lies in the hands of moody Soren?” He makes a weird noise that sounds like something being deflated with force before he talks away from the phone to say, “Forget it, man. We’re going to be traveling like sardines in a tin can. Might as well put the chips down now. We can’t afford any extra padding between now and then.”

“It’s a good thing you teach theater. God knows how else you’d deal with the overflow of that dramatic flair,” I muse dryly.

Chase doesn’t answer. I’m not sure he even heard me. From what I can make out, he’s wrapped up in some separate conversation happening in his living room. When he returns his attention to me, his tone has lost all sense of his previous antics. “Mal wants to talk to you.”

“I sent her proof of life.” I roll my eyes. “Didn’t she get it yet?”

“She did.” He clears his throat. “That’s why she wants to talk to you.”

Next, I hear Mal relieving my brother of his phone. There’s an accusation of pinching, followed up with denial that borders on too extravagant to be believable until finally, “Lachlan?”

“Mallory.”

“I told you this was a bad idea,” she hisses. “I told everyone. But did anyone listen to me? No. No they did not. And now, look what happened.”

I’m at a loss. “What happened?”

“Well, if you don’t know, the problem is even bigger than I anticipated,” she screeches. Then the line goes dead.

For several seconds, I just stare at my phone, gaping, hoping if enough time passes, this conversation will somehow make sense to me. When nothing changes, I close my eyes, take a breath and slide my phone into my pocket.

When I open my eyes again, the world makes sense. Monroe is sniffing a tulip. She giggles. And nothing else matters anymore.



CHAPTER TWENTY

REER

G Once our new relationship settles in, Katia and I find a whole new rhythm. It's like we develop a beautifully choreographed dance with Soren, moving perfectly in sync as we evade the queen's efforts at every turn and then find ways to appease her. By the end of my first week at the castle, I've successfully avoided all the absurd history lessons and plans, dressed in her chosen garbs only on those occasions when I was accompanied by her and my future sister-in-law, Isobel (who seems nice enough even if she clearly isn't forced to wear the town hag's hand-me-downs) and even got to choose my own wedding cake. I had to give up peppadew peppers to do it, and surrender the entire menu to the queen, but it was worth it. Or it will be when I get to eat said cake.

Much to the queen's dismay, Lachlan and I make it to our last Sunday before the wedding still engaged. And, having spent a fair amount of time together despite her efforts to achieve the contrary, I'm more confident than ever we will pull this off. I'm also fairly certain I stopped pretending somewhere along the way. Thankfully, I have more important things to worry about than sorting out my own messy heart, leaving me free to dwell in denial for the time being.

So, here I stand, in my closet, reviewing the queen's choices for my special evening. They're not as horribly bad as others I've worn, but they're not exactly what I would choose for the occasion. If I had a choice.

"Worried he won't stop dead in his tracks at the sight of you in one of those?" Katia teases, joining me in what we've dubbed 'the room of doom' given the queen's intense interest in dressing me.

"I think we both know that kind of reaction is out no matter what I'm wearing," I point out. "That kind of reaction requires not being in total control of your emotions every second of every day, and Lachlan is a stickler for that kind of control. I actually think it might be one of his superpowers." Especially given he made so little use of it in New York. Clearly, it's a skill he applies at will.

"You're joking, right?" Katia half frowns half laughs, stuck in limbo as she tries to read my reaction.

"I'm completely serious." I'm aware it's a rare occasion, but it does happen.

"Prince Lachlan is so taken by you, he's never in control of anything anytime you're around." This time, she laughs out loud.

"What are you talking about?" I shake my head at her. "He hardly even laughs at my jokes since we got here. All I ever get is his polite laugh, the kind most people save for things that aren't funny. And I'll have you know, I'm hilarious! If that's not total self-control, I don't know what is."

"Laughing isn't what I'm talking about," she says walking toward the rack to pull the first hanger down. I guess I'm going to try these things on. We might get lucky. One might look better on than hanging limp on the hanger. "I'm talking about how you obliterate every thought in the man's head every time you walk into the room." She holds the long champagne number up under my neck, giving us both a preview of what's to come. It's not promising. "You can't tell me you've never noticed that. Never witnessed the way his eyes flash with a mild panic when reality catches up to him and he becomes aware he's forgotten whatever he was thinking before you showed up."

"The man has already promised me eternal love, Katia. You don't need to go out of your way to boost my ego. It's not that fragile," I tease watching her peel the dress from her hanger before she hands it to me.

“That’s fine,” she jokes, walking out of the closet to give me some privacy while I change. “You can deny it all you like. I know what I see. It’s my specialty, you know. It’s why the queen chose me to be your assistant in the first place.”

“I thought it was the ease at which you could be blackmailed,” I call back, slipping out of the first ugly dress of my day. I had dance lessons this morning. The queen supervised so I wore something that resembles a circus tent and let Katia take credit.

“No.” Her voice echoes its way back to me through the high ceilings. “The opportunity for blackmail just meant she could use my talents to serve her needs. Without my skills of insight and observation, the ability to blackmail me would have been useless.”

I shrug, thinking it over while I move my head through the layers of lace and silk lining trying to get into this thing. The material is gorgeous, but the cut of the dress leaves much to be desired. “I guess that makes sense,” I mumble. “Explains why you’re so good at being the queen’s spy and why you make everyone else so nervous.”

She walks back in. She told me a few days ago, she timed me every time I tried on a new outfit that first morning with Simon, then calculated the average and now uses this to come and go from the closet every time I change clothes. It’s one of about a million ways I’ve discovered her levels of efficiency are far and beyond anything any normal human being would ever consider striving for. I like it. I want to take her home with me.

“That’s terrifying.” She stares at me, eyes wide.

“Should I bother stepping in front of the mirror?” I ask. I’ve made a habit of avoiding all reflective surfaces when trying on clothes here. At least until Katia gives the go ahead.

“You should not.” She hands me another dress. “Try this next.” Then she hands me my phone. “After you call Mallory. She’s been texting you so much, I think your phone might burst into flame if it has to accept another message from her.”

“Thanks.” I don’t know what I’m more nervous about. Trying on this next dress or reading Mal’s messages. I’ve barely talked to her in days, mostly because she’s been sending me ‘call me – it’s urgent texts’ since I got here, and I know her idea of urgent has nothing to do with any sort of time-pressed emergency and everything to do with her nosy ass wanting to know every little detail of my current life and thus the results of my bad choice to fake marry Lachlan. Which even I must admit, is starting to feel like it will wind up being one of the more tragic mistakes of my life.

“You’re starting to freak out my assistant,” I say the second I hear her answer.

“Good. I like to break people in before I deal with them in person. That way I’m less of a shock to their system.” Chase and Abbas are talking in the background, though I notice their voices get quieter the longer she’s silent. She must have been hanging out at their place when I called. “Is she there now?”

“No.” I plop down on the cushy chaise lounge, my favorite part of having an extra-large closet – it comes with its own furniture. “Are you back in our apartment, away from the boys and their curious ears?”

“Yep.” There’s a soft thud on her end and I imagine her dropping into our sofa, getting settled for our catch-up chat. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead with what?” I’m not so much playing dumb as I’m playing it smart. I’m going to need a more specific direction before I spill my guts to her. No need to give her more ammunition to ridicule me with later than necessary.

“Go ahead and tell me how you’re in love with him and how I was right, and you were wrong, and this is the biggest mistake ever,” she rattles off her instructions.

“Oh. That.” Sounds like she about covered it. “I’m not really sure I have anything to add to that.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? I didn’t even ask you a question.” I reach down with my free hand, patting the carpet under the chaise. Somewhere under here should be an open bag of tortilla chips. I left it for Cheese, but if he hasn’t helped himself to my offering yet, I could really go for a snack with this conversation.

“No, as in, no it’s not going to be that easy,” she scoffs. “You haven’t talked to me in a week. I’m boarding a plane in a few days and I have no idea what I’m walking into. I need to know. What am I walking into?”

“Very lovely accommodations at the prince’s castle?” Finally, my fingers touch foil. I’m so excited when I yank up the bag, I almost send chips flying across my closet.

“Linden has changed you,” she remarks dryly. “I feel like I don’t know you at all anymore.”

I open my mouth wide to fit three chips in at once. Then I crunch in surrender. “Fine. You need to hear me say it? I’ll say it.” I pause to swallow. “There’s a distinct possibility Lachlan is a little more wonderful than I anticipated, and all this real-life fairy-tale crap may be on occasion, ever so slightly, and profoundly annoyingly, messing with my head a teeny-tiny, itty-bitty – *minuscule, really* – bit.”

“That was almost acceptable,” Mal responds. I can hear her crunching away on something as well. “But I think you meant to say heart, not head.”

“No, I didn’t.” I’m sure of this part at least. “My heart and I haven’t been on speaking terms in years. There’s no telling what it feels about any of this. All my dealings are with the brain. And the body.” I add more chips to my mouth to muffle the words that need to follow. “My body is talking a lot. It’s not good, Mal. Not good at all.”

She laughs. “If you really think your heart is on mute here, you’re fucked no matter which way this turns.” I have half a mind to take offense, but she goes on before I can voice such feelings. “Since you’re set on denial, let’s switch to a problem we can actually solve. My plus one.”

“You mean in addition to Abbas?” I clarify what others would deem obvious.

“Abbas is not my plus one,” she insists adamantly.

“But he *is* coming to the wedding,” I point out. “And you *are* sleeping with him.”

“I don’t see how either statements are relevant to the topic.”

“Well, do you plan to stop sleeping with him the week of the wedding?” I ask, my mind half on the issue and half on searching the bag of chips in my lap for ones that aren’t yet broken in pieces.

“I can’t seem to go longer than three days without a fix, so that’s unlikely,” she says, and I can’t tell if she’s displeased with this fact or my inquiring about it.

I stop my search for chips that aren’t reduced to large crumbs. “Then I think both statements are very relevant to the topic.”

“Greer,” she whines. “Stop overcomplicating my life.”

“I’m actually trying to simplify it. The boy you’re sleeping with already RSVPed for the wedding. Bringing another one just because your invite says you can *that* would overcomplicate your life.”

She’s silent for all of three seconds before she makes another argument. “What if Abbas brings a plus one?”

“He’s not bringing a plus one,” I tell her, diving back into the bag. “He’s like, totally gaga over you. The only way he’s bringing someone else to the wedding is if you do. And even then, it would only be to stick it to you, not because he actually wanted to bring someone else.”

“Can you check?”

“Can I check if he RSVPed for a plus one?” I don’t need to check. I know he didn’t because Soren made a snide comment about not being surprised all my friends were single and unwanted. “He’s not bringing a plus one. *You’re* his plus one.”

She mulls it over. “I just think I would feel better if I came with someone else. Someone totally platonic. If I come alone, I’ll just end up spending all my time with Abbas and then the casual thing will get all confusing because of all the wedding fantasy vibes smogging up the air in Linden.”

I roll my eyes. Mostly because I know she can’t see it. Then, I surrender to her madness. “So, ask Josh to come.” Mal and Josh have been each other’s backups since college, though they never have been on an actual date. He ought to be perfect for this.

“I can’t,” she sighs. “He has a girlfriend. Some chick he went to high school with named Jennie.”

“Josh and Jennie.” I can practically hear her rolling her eyes back into her skull as I say it. “That’s *adorable*.”

“Is it?” She wouldn’t think so. Her nerdy science brain can’t get down with that kind of cutesy shit. “Seems a little too twinsy to me. But whatever. If he’s happy, I’m happy.”

That much I know is true. “Okay, well, if Josh is out, and you refuse to acknowledge Abbas as your date, where does that leave you?”

“In need of a matchmaker. Come on, Greer. You haven’t met a single knight or duke or lord you can hook me up with for your wedding spectacle?”

“The only single dude I hang with here is an angry little man named Soren.” I smirk to myself. “You know what, I’ll set it up. You’re perfect for each other.”



LACHLAN

“IT’S NOT A SPEECH TO address the nation,” Soren grumbles when he walks in the room, the second time in thirty minutes, to find I’m still right where he left me. At my desk, writing my formal introduction of Greer. “I know.” I lay down my pen and look up at him. “That’s why it’s so hard to write.”

“You’re overthinking this,” he insists, marching my way. “Let me see what you have so far.”

Begrudgingly, I hand him the sheet of paper. Ordinarily, this isn’t the sort of thing I’d want his input on, but I’m running out of time and I need someone outside of my own brain to help me sort out what I’m getting stuck on.

Soren takes a dramatic inhale, glares at me, and then begins to read. The longer he does, the more upsetting his face gets. Finally, he looks up. “You can’t use this.”

“Not any of it?” I knew there were issues, but I thought at least some parts were good enough to make the final draft.

“Not unless you want her to know you’re in love with her.”

“What are you talking about?” I shake my head, trying to make sense of what he’s saying. “I want everyone to think I’m in love with her. That’s the whole point here.”

“No.” He hands the speech back to me. “The point of *this* speech is that you’re *actually* in love with her. If you want to convince everyone that you are but keep her thinking that you’re still faking it, you have to rewrite it.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” I hold the paper in my hand, but now I can’t get myself to reread any of what I wrote.

“Saying what?” Soren looks as confused as I feel, only with less emotion. He’s confused, but clearly bored with this topic.

“That I’m in love with her.”

“Are you not aware that you are?” His nose twitches the way it does when he finds me mildly amusing, and he has to use his finger to push his glasses back into place when he’s done.

“I can’t be aware of something I’m not,” I say with all the air of a six-year-old winning an argument he doesn’t know he’s lost due to ignorance and immaturity. “And for the record, I really don’t appreciate people insisting I don’t know my own feelings, or how they pertain to Greer.”

He cocks a brow. “So, I’m not the first to tell you this.”

I see now I’ve said too much. He’ll never let it go now. “Chase might have come to the same conclusion before I left New York,” I mumble, spending a great deal of effort on smoothing out a piece of paper on my desk which was never crumpled to begin with. “And I’m pretty sure Abbas and their friend Mallory made similar assumptions.”

“Which one of us do you think doesn’t know you well enough to know what we’re talking about?” he asks, smirking. Nothing delights him more than being right about something.

“I think you all know me just fine.” I pick up my pen again. “I think you’re all just confused by my great acting skills.” I point at my speech. “And my talents for creative writing.”

“Fine.” He’s not really conceding. I can tell by his patronizing tone. “Do you think Greer is as easily confused as the rest of us?”

“I think Greer is a professional and she’s used to acting and reading scripts. So no,” I confirm, more for myself than Soren, “I don’t think she’ll get confused between what is real and what is pretend for sake of our arrangement.”

“I hope you’re right.” He nods at the paper between my hands. “Because convincing me that you’re in love with her when you’re not, doesn’t land me a broken heart down the road.”

“You don’t know, Greer,” I tell him, eyes settling in on my own words again. “Even if she believed my heart was in this, she wouldn’t let her own get anywhere near me.”

“If you believe that, I think maybe *you’re* the one who doesn’t know her.” He shakes his head and turns toward the door again. “I’m going to go occupy myself for another ten minutes. Then I’m coming back for you and that speech better be done.” He reaches the door handle and stalls. “Now might be a good time to start thinking about sticking to formal vows at your wedding. I don’t think either one of you could handle it if you wrote your own.”

Then he’s out in the hall, door falling shut behind him.

Silence returns. Briefly. Then my own thoughts explode in my head. To make matters worse, Soren’s voice starts ringing in my ears as well. I spend at least half my allotted time just trying to tune the craziness out and clear my head enough to finish writing my formal introduction before giving up on the efforts. Most of it is done, the closing I can always come up with on the spot. As Soren pointed out, it’s not a speech to address the nation. It’s more like a toast over dinner with my family. If I can swing one, I can clearly manage the other.

With a couple moments left to spare, I make a quick stop in Monroe’s room to visit with her. Despite my arguments, my stepmother insisted a formal dinner was no place for a toddler. The silver lining, is of course, that she won’t be subjected to the boring unpleasantness of dinner with my family which Greer and I will have to endure.

A few minutes later, I’m folding the sheet of paper with my scribbles into my pocket and heading for the door just in time to meet Soren when he swings it open to announce, “Time’s up.”

“Thank you. I have a watch. I can tell time.”

“Could have fooled me,” he mutters under his breath, ushering me out into the hall and closing the door behind us.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Greer’s voice greets me as soon as I step foot outside my quarters.

“What are you doing?” I ask, sounding aghast. “How am I supposed to come and pick you up to take you to our formal date if you’re not in your room?”

“Are you seriously asking me to go back inside just so I can walk back out upon invitation?”

I clench my teeth to keep from grinning. “No. That would be ridiculous.”

She stares at me for several seconds. Then she rolls her eyes, spins on her heel, and walks back into her room.

After the door closes behind her, I give it a slow count to five, before I knock and wait for her to answer.

“One moment please,” she calls back from inside.

I almost laugh out loud, but Soren shoots me a smug grin and I stop myself to deny him the satisfaction.

“Almost there,” she follows up her stalling with more stalling.

I’m about to knock a second time when the door opens again. To my surprise, now it’s Katia who greets me on the other side.

“Please, come in, your highness,” she says, stepping aside and waving me in. “Miss Greer will be with you shortly.”

Behind me, Soren is laughing.

Katia is kind enough to shut the door on him the second I step inside.

“Would you mind telling me how Miss Greer is keeping busy?” I ask Katia, who almost certainly knows Greer is having fun at my expense. Though, I must admit, she’s unusually relaxed, given the circumstances.

“She’s taking steps to be fashionably late, your highness.” Katia curtsies, excusing herself to leave me to fend for myself in the entryway. “I’ll see if I can assist her in some way.”

“Wait. No.” Assisting her in delaying our departure for dinner further isn’t quite the help I was hoping for.

But it’s no use. She walks away without acknowledging whether she’s heard me or not.

Seconds pass that seem to stretch into eons before I finally hear the sound of heels making their way down the stairs toward me.

I’m fully prepared to sternly inform her that we really don’t have time for her ridiculous games when she comes into view. And my reaction to the sight, is one I’m woefully *unprepared* for.

“You changed your dress,” I say, nearly stumbling over those four small words.

“Well, you hardly took notice of the last one,” she jokes, reaching the last step and walking toward me. “Hell, you even sent me back in my room.”

Her previous dress was nice enough. A simple, maroon gown my stepmother clearly had a hand in choosing, but which Greer still wore beautifully because she’s Greer and everything that touches her becomes beautiful. But this -

“There’s no way the queen approved this gown,” I say when nothing else comes to mind. At least, nothing I can say out loud. To Greer.

“She did,” Katia confirms, a strange smirk stretching her usually stern lips. “Well, she approved the two gowns that originally made up this one,” she explains. “We decided to take the sheer lace cover from one and paired it with the slip of the other.”

“Pretty creative, huh?” Greer winks at me.

“Uh-huh.” I can see now how each piece would have been suitable by the queen’s standards when paired with something else. The champagne-colored lace cover climbs Greer’s neck and ends in a delicate ruffle under her chin. While it’s fitted on the top, it flares at the waist and would swallow her whole if paired with heavier material in the same cut. Which it’s not. Instead, she’s wearing it with a tiny black number that leaves little to the imagination between the form-fitting cut, the low neckline and particularly short hemline cutting high across her thighs.

“Best part of all.” Greer stretches one foot forward to show off her shoes. “I was able to wear my own black pumps instead of the abominations now buried in the back of my closet.”

“Yeah.” I’m still struggling to find words. I’m barely formulating real thoughts.

“Shall we?” She grins. Like she knows exactly what she’s done to me. Like she’s loving every second of it.

“Yes.” I swallow several times. When did my mouth get this dry?

“Your highness?” Katia asks from behind me, and I turn back over my shoulder to look at her. “Your father had this sent to the room. I was told to give it to Soren before dinner, but since you’re here.” She hands me a small velvet box and my heart stops.

The ring. I very specifically rushed the process of choosing it when my father insisted on taking me down to the vault this afternoon. I hardly even looked at it, just asked to see what was available and chose the first one that caught my eye. My father tried repeatedly to sway me toward my mother’s ring, but that was a leap in our lie I wasn’t prepared to take. In the end, I think his feelings were hurt, as if I was implying the ring was bad luck in some way, given the way their marriage ended. I appeased my guilt by reminding myself that I was coming back for that ring someday. When I was really engaged.

Only now, that I’m standing here, about to put a ring on Greer’s finger – a meaningless ring – all I can think is how I should have chosen my mother’s.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GREER Lachlan hasn't said a word since we left my room. He barely even looked at me when he slid the ring on my finger. Of course, I've barely been able to look at said ring. Mostly, I'm just trying to deny its existence. It's too much. Too surreal. Or maybe that's the problem. It's not surreal at all. It's real. Too real. Too heavy on my finger.

"Get your speech all written?" I ask, trying to break the dreadful silence between us. Normally, when we're quiet, it feels comfortable. Tonight, it feels suffocating.

"Yep."

Still one-word answers. Maybe the prospect of dinner and a formal announcement is making him more nervous than I thought it would. "Soren said you were having a hard time with it," I start. His head jerks in my direction, scowling, and I instantly regret it. "If you're worried you won't sound profoundly in love with me, I'm sure I can spin something on the spot to make up for it," I try to smooth it over.

He sighs, facing ahead again. "I wish Soren hadn't told you that."

"It's really not that big of a deal," I insist. "I'm sure it wasn't easy trying to balance sounding convincing without sounding over the top."

"Yeah."

"Dude, what is happening right now?" I tug at his arm playfully, trying my hardest to loosen him up a bit. "I get that you're all regal Lachlan here in Linden, but I know you're not lacking in your vocabulary. Prince Lachlan is just as chatty as New York Lachlan, even if he is a little short on the humor in comparison."

"You don't think I'm funny here?" he asks, head only slightly dipping in my direction to meet my eye. It's less abrupt than the previous head jerk and while he's not smiling with his mouth, I can see the shine of it in his baby blues again.

"Ah, nice deflecting," I tease. But I roll with it. Because I'd still rather the avoiding Lachlan over the stoic, silent Lachlan. "And you know you're not."

Gradually, the energy around him shifts and by the time we're approaching the grand hall, things begin to feel normal between us again.

This part of the castle is new to me, though truthfully, I'm not sure I would have noticed if I didn't specifically know I was at the grand dining hall to which I have previously not been. The décor around here, as well as the architecture, make it nearly impossible to tell one hall from the other.

"You look amazing tonight," he says quietly as we near the tall double doors. "You always look beautiful, but that dress, and the way you shine wearing it... it took my breath away. And all my words went with it."

His palm presses against mine and his eyes cast down to meet our hands, twined into one.

Then the doors open. And the magic of our moment ceases to exist so instantly, I can't help but wonder if it was real at all.

"Mom?" I'm so startled by the sight of her, I don't know if I'm screaming or whispering. I also don't know how to move anymore. A fact I notice when I see Lachlan turn back for me.

"Greer, darling." My mother stands from her seat at the table where she's been placed at the queen's side. Even in my state of shock, I can piece together that her majesty is behind my mother's sudden appearance.

“It’s so wonderful to see you.” She walks toward me, arms outstretched. “You’re so grown up. Look at you, you’re gorgeous.”

I’m desperate to step out of her path, but the sudden lead in my veins is making movement impossible. Thankfully, Lachlan catches up to the situation and blocks her before she reaches me. “I didn’t know we’d have a guest for dinner,” his voice cuts loudly across the room.

“It was intended as a surprise,” the queen responds with a snide satisfaction I haven’t heard from her since she tricked me into spending four hours listening to every rendition of Linden’s national anthem ever recorded two days ago. “Once I learned that Greer has been separated from her mother since childhood, of course I had to do everything in my power to reunite them.” She smiles but it does little to disguise her hatred. And she does hate me. I am, after all, the villain in her tale, come to aid her evil stepson in stealing the crown from the prince she gave birth to. “Consider it an early wedding gift.”

I watch as Lachlan’s entire back stiffens and his shoulders square off even broader and straighter than they already do with his normal posture. With him between us and my mother’s face out of my line of vision, I can start to think clearly again.

My thoughts are racing trying to find a way out of this emotional maze. I didn’t see this coming when I stepped inside the grand hall tonight.

I watch Lachlan’s leg move, on the verge of stepping forward and I know he’s about to lunge into an all-out verbal war with the queen on my behalf. That’s when I realize. There’s no way out.

So, I jump in. Headfirst. Because the only way to escape the maze, is through.

“I’m touched, your majesty,” I say quickly before Lachlan can make his next move. “Truly. It’s a gesture far and beyond anything anyone has ever done for me.” Placing my hand on his shoulder, I start to step around him to face my own mother. I can’t look at him as I go by. I don’t dare let him see what’s inside me because I know his eyes will reflect it back to me. And I won’t be able to numb myself to my own feelings when he’s feeling them for me.

“Mom,” I bite out forcing a smile. “I can’t believe you’ve come all this way.” Especially when she couldn’t ever make it three blocks east to see me growing up. But I keep that part unspoken between us.

“It’s your wedding,” she says as if that would make her presence a given. “Where else would I be?”

My mind is already reeling with possible truths, the real reason she agreed to come. The queen must have enticed her with something. Or maybe it was enough to hear her only daughter was about to be royalty.

“I can’t tell you what this means to me,” I clutch my chest, and I can’t help but think how easy it is to say so many honest things in such an untruthful way. Lachlan moves in closer behind me, his hand resting protectively on my waist. “Mom, it is my great honor to introduce you to my fiancé, Prince Lachlan of Linden.”

I’m not actually sure if that’s the proper way to introduce your royal fake fiancé to your estranged mother and his future fake mother-in-law, but it’s the best I can do on the spot. I notice the queen didn’t erupt in a derisive snort at the table, so it must have been acceptable. At least, under the circumstances.

My mother drops her gaze and lowers herself into a dramatic curtsy. “Your highness, it’s an honor and truly a delight.”

“Lachlan,” I turn, for the first time meeting his gaze. “My mother. Esther Howards.” It sounds weird, hearing the name out loud. She was Esther Deluca when she was my mother. Then she left us.

Remarried. Became Esther Howards and I never saw reason to speak her name again. She was a stranger.

Even now, standing right in front of her, she feels like one. A stranger with my mother's face. It's surreal.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Lachlan says through gritted teeth, extending his hand toward her. "Please, the formalities won't be necessary. After all, we're about to be family."

My mother smiles and it's all the proof I need my suspicions were spot on. She's here for her piece of the royal pie. The irony of this isn't lost on me. In fact, it's almost a bit of silver lining, realizing she's come all this way for something she was brought here to ensure I can never give to her.

"Shall we?" I ask, directing my upturned palm toward the table and the rest of our dinner party. It's the lady like way to point. I'm positive. It's the way Soren does it.

My mother wastes no time reclaiming her chair beside the queen. Clearly, she's as of yet unaware of the royal step monster's tendencies.

"I don't know how you're keeping it together right now," Lachlan's deep voice rumbles quietly in my ear as he leans in close while helping me into my seat across from my mother. "But you're amazing."

I turn to catch him with a kiss against his cheek before he moves away again. "Thank you." I don't whisper. Just let everyone think I'm appreciating his gentlemanly gesture.

In turn, he softly grazes the side of my head with his lips before straightening up and pulling out the chair beside mine for himself.

From here, the formalities ensue in an extravagant fashion beyond anything I've witnessed so far during my time here.

There are trumpets. A maître d' who announces every item before it is served. Countless men and women, rushing in and out to serve and clear all while a live orchestra plays softly in the background.

Only once we've completed seven courses of food and beverages, do we get to the heart of the matter and the reason we've all been forced to gather together tonight. The formal announcement of our engagement.



LACHLAN

GREER HASN'T BEEN THE same since being confronted with her mother. Even though she covered her shock nearly seamlessly, I know inside, she must be battling a sense of betrayal unlike any other. And though it didn't come through me directly, I can't help feeling responsible.

If I hadn't brought her here, if I hadn't agreed to let her take up this fight with me against my stepmother, none of this would be happening.

I watch as she goes through the motions making small talk with my sister-in-law, smiling at my father, even going so far as to include her mother in conversation by asking her questions, even if they are trivial and shallow and never extend beyond the context of her trip or her enjoyment of the current weather. She does it. She puts on a remarkable show. I notice even the queen is oddly spellbound by her.

It's hard to describe how I feel sitting beside Greer. Taking in her strength, observing her talent for playing her part so perfectly even under duress. Maybe it's not hard to describe. Maybe it's hard to face. I'm in awe of her. And if I'm honest, tonight isn't the first time I've felt this way.

It is, however, the first time since we arrived, that I've seen so clearly the contrast between who she is and who Linden has made her become. I didn't realize it until now but watching her come down those stairs tonight in that gown, was the first time since we arrived here, she looked like herself. And not just because the gown reflected her style instead of the queen's. It was in the way she walked, sauntering down those steps with her usual sass and confidence. The way she carried herself with that magic combination of grace and humor. And the way she looked at me. It was the same way she did that day in her father's bookstore making me a deal I couldn't refuse. Whether it was because the offer was too good to be true, or she was the one making it, I may never know.

Then seeing her here, sitting beside me, every bit the future queen I asked her to play, I can't help seeing she's doing more than just acting a part anymore. Where before she was formal and reserved, now she's simply void of feeling. Even while wearing a dress that screams of her vibrant personality, life here with me, has made her disappear.

Suddenly I understand my father's need to let my mother go in a way I never wanted to. It's both poetic and heartbreaking, finding that the moment I finally understand I always want to keep her with me is the very same I know I can never let her stay.

"Lachlan?" Greer's hand brushes against mine, pulling me from my thoughts and back to the present.

It takes me another second to realize she's not the one trying to get my attention as much as my father is.

"If that isn't a man in love," he chuckles, shaking his head at me. "So consumed by the beauty of his woman the rest of the room has ceased to exist." He smiles, standing from his chair at the head of the table and raising his glass toward me. "It is my great honor to invite Lachlan to share with us tonight, his most exciting news." He gestures for me to stand.

"Thank you, father." I smile graciously when I reach my full height. "But I'm the one who is honored. Honored to be here in your presence tonight and include you in what will undoubtedly become the most significant moment of my life." I turn toward Greer who beams up at me. Her eyes are big and bright. But they're empty. It takes everything I have to keep smiling as I go on. "Please allow me the pleasure of formally introducing you to Greer Philladora Deluca, my fiancée."

A polite round of applause ensues, and I wait for everyone to quiet down before I continue. "I prepared a speech for the occasion," I pause to retrieve the folded paper from my breast pocket. Then, halfway, I change my mind and slide it back into place. "Perhaps it's best to just let the words come straight from my heart." I break my eyes from hers and face the table. I can lie to everyone here. I just can't lie to her. Or myself anymore.

"Born the only daughter of Morton and Esther Deluca, Greer grew up well loved - the apple of her father's eye." I clear my throat, purposely excluding Esther from any further sentiments before I go on, "A shining light among her peers, it wasn't long before Greer found herself on stage, thriving in theatrical performances and various artistic expressions. However, it wasn't until adulthood, that she found her true passion, her soul's calling. Children. Without any of her own, she's made it her life's work to care for the children of others. Her natural instinct to nurture may well be how fate finally nudged us toward each other for it was watching her engaged with Monroe that truly allowed me to see her for the first time. Without the veils of family ties shrouding my vision, I saw Greer. And I knew instantly, she was the mother my daughter so truly deserved, and the wife I'd been longing for." I end my speech by sliding my hand down my side until it finds hers at the table. Unlike every time before, this time, I don't twine my fingers with hers. Instead, I simply wrap them around her delicate

hand and clasp it in mine. “Please welcome my future wife and your future queen to the Westergaard family.”

A murmur of welcomes follows which Greer graciously responds to. Then, we’re both saved by the trumpets and a final round of champagne.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

GREER

Once the formal dinner comes to an official end, we move on to after dinner drinks. While Lachlan warned me there'd be more formalities to follow, he failed to mention we'd be separated for them. Best I can figure, it's Linden's nod to bachelor and bachelorette parties, which before now have not come up, and which this reminds of as we're being ushered into separate rooms. Boys to the left and girls to the right.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't mind. I'm well-enough versed in Myrna's games to play along, and Isobel's company is hardly a chore. Half the time, I forget she's even in the room, she's so quiet. Lachlan's grandmother has been the toughest nut to crack thus far. Truth be told, I was hoping to have my shot at her tonight. But that was before I showed up for dinner only to find my mother sitting at the table.

I scan the room. It feels a lot like standing in a field of landmines. I'm not sure which way I want to go or where to risk explosion. Isobel seems the obvious choice. Or she would if I didn't know Myrna well enough to predict her next move would simply be to track me down and trap me and I don't need two landmines standing that close to one another. Which then leads me to think my best approach is Myrna herself.

Ordinarily, this would satisfy her. But tonight is anything but ordinary. She brought my mother all this way for a reason. If I join Myrna, she will no doubt invite my mother as well. And then, I'm back at two.

Which leaves me with the former queen, the family matriarch and Lachlan's grandmother. But, if I want to win her over, I need to save my efforts for a night I don't have two loose cannons in the room.

This means of course, my choice is simple. The person I approach is the very one I wish would disappear. My mother.

"Kind of ironic, don't you think?" I ask under my breath sidling up to her. "My whole life you couldn't be bothered to travel three blocks to see me, but now that I'm three thousand miles away, suddenly you find the motivation."

"Are you sure you want to have this conversation now?" she asks, her tone as low as mine, her smile about ten times as fake. "With present company as an audience?"

"Trust me," I whisper, barely moving my lips as I speak, "The queen will see to it we have the privacy we need. After all, she brought you all this way for a reason. She won't dare interrupt when things are going according to plan and she won't interfere to get her hands dirty unless she deems it absolutely necessary."

"Funny," my mother simpers. "You don't seem nearly as fond of your future mother-in-law as she sounded of you when she first called me."

"To be honest, mothers in general don't really do it for me." I scrunch my nose and eyes and grimace at her in a way that can be interpreted as playful or disgusted depending on perspective.

Judging by the way she falls back a step, she took it as it was intended for her.

"Greer," she starts over. Even though she's still keeping her voice down, her tone has changed. She isn't attempting to reason with me, she's pleading. "I know I failed you growing up. Can't you see that is precisely why I am here now?"

I almost laugh. Instead, I cover my mouth and mimic the same sort of polite little giggle I've watched Isobel enact countless times since I've been here. I daresay, it's her signature move. "You

can't be serious. You really expect me to believe it was some latent maternal instinct that prompted you to board a plane and come all this way?"

"I realize this is hard for you to understand," she tries again. "I'm not proud of the woman I was then."

"Are you proud of the one you are now?" I don't know why I'm asking. I don't care. Except, I suppose I'm curious to hear the answer. And maybe, if I'm honest, I'm expecting her to give me more ammunition to pelt back at her.

She raises her chin even as she lowers her eyes. "Yes." But her body language betrays her. I can still see the shame she carries. For a moment, I almost feel bad for her. Then I catch a glimpse of the queen watching us, a wicked smirk curling the corner of her thin mouth, and the moment passes.

"You should take what little pride you think you have to cling to and go back home," I huff. "I promise, I will leave you with none if you're still here by the time my father arrives."

She looks surprised. "I was told your father wasn't coming."

He's not. There's no way I could ask him to close the shop and come all the way to Linden for my fake wedding. But I was hoping she didn't know that. Regardless, I've already bluffed my way through this entire engagement, why stop now when it could actually serve me for a change? "My father is the one person I've been able to count on my entire life. He's been there for every step, every first and every milestone. Do you honestly believe he would miss my wedding?"

She takes a moment to process what I'm saying before she pulls herself up a little taller again. Her face becomes more rigid as she starts to speak again. "What I came here to tell you won't take me longer than one night." She nods curtly. "Hear me out and I'll be gone come morning."

I have zero interest in hearing what she has to say, but what I lack in interest I make up for in motivation to see her disappear again, and so, I agree. "Speak your piece. I promise you have my undivided attention until you're done."

"Fine." Her mouth no longer makes the effort to feign a smile. "I'll cut right to the chase." She lifts her chin ever so slightly as if it will somehow make her taller than me. "Don't marry the prince."

I almost laugh. "I'm sorry, is that what *you* came here to say? Or what the queen flew you here to say? Because that's the message she's been trying to get across to me since I arrived in Linden."

"Our message may sound the same, but I can assure you we're sharing it for two very different reasons." If I wondered before how transparent the queen was with my mother, I don't now.

"So, enlighten me. Why don't you want me to get married?"

Her eyes scan the room as if to be sure no one has had any foolish thoughts recently about joining us. Then she leans in a little closer. "Because you have too much to offer the world to give it all to one person."

"What would you know about what I have to offer?" I scoff. "You don't even know me."

"I know you're my daughter," she huffs indignantly, as if those words are supposed to mean something. "I know your dreams are just as big as mine were. And I know you'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't chase them with everything you've got." She shakes her head, twisting her mouth as if the bitter taste of her own regrets is souring her tongue. "Marry this boy now, and you'll lose everything you've been working so hard for. Marry him...and you disappear. You'll never come back from it."

"You're wrong," I insist, though even as I take up the argument, a voice in the back of my mind nags at me not to engage. I can't help myself. I won't let her think she's right about this. "Lachlan supports my dreams. I can have both. I can be married and still follow my dreams."

She laughs derisively and something about the sound is so cold, it jars me internally. "I thought that too. And maybe I could have if I'd stayed just a wife."

"But you became a mother," I conclude darkly. "And *that's* what killed your dreams." Now it's my turn to laugh with callous disdain. "I guess that settles the argument then."

"It does." She nods. "Because you're marrying a man with a child."

My own laughter catches in my throat. I don't have time to form another retort before she goes on, "A wife may have room to be selfish. A mother does not. And make no mistake, Greer, you marry a man with a baby, and you become a mother. What you won't become, is an actress." Her laughter has also vanished without a trace. "It'll take a while before the reality catches up with you. In the beginning, you'll think there's still time. You'll think you can let it go just long enough to be there while the baby needs you most. But eventually you realize a child never stops needing you. And the sort of dreams you and I were born with? They need you just as much. Only by the time you realize you'll need to choose, the choice has already been made. The sacrifice is complete. And then," her voice trails off for a second or two, "Then you meet with hatred. And anger. And a sense of betrayal you can never forgive. Not yourself. Not your child. And certainly not your husband."

"So, you didn't leave to pursue your dreams," I conclude slowly. "You left because you hated us for taking them from you."

"No." She swallows several times in a row and it's the first sign she's shown of having any emotion. "I left because I hated myself for letting you. And because the person it turned me into didn't have anything to offer you or your father anymore." Her eyes cast toward the floor. "I didn't have anything to offer anyone for a very long time." She sighs heavily before slowly turning her eyes up to meet mine again. "I never want you to be as broken as I was, Greer. Don't you see that? Don't you see I had to come here, to save you from becoming me?"

A shooting pain travels from my jaw up to my temple and it serves to let me know I've been clenching my jaw too tightly for too long already. "The only thing I see is a lost woman making a pathetic attempt at redemption she doesn't deserve to find," I hiss. "You don't want me to end up broken? Too late. I broke the day you walked out, and I've been in pieces ever since. Unlike you, I learned to carry my shattered bits around so well, no one can tell they're not whole. Not even you."

Then I turn and march straight for the queen. I've heard enough from my mother tonight. Anything her royal vindictiveness could possibly have in store for me next will pale in comparison.



LACHLAN

"YOU CHANGED YOUR SPEECH," Soren says after we've been standing along the wall, isolated from the party with two untouched drinks in our hands for at least ten minutes.

"You told me to," I remind him.

"I tell you to do all sorts of things." He chuckles. "You never listen."

I shrug. "You're not usually right."

Soren leans his head in toward me ever so slightly. "What part exactly was it I was right about?"

I clear my throat. "That it would be best to keep things simple."

"Ah." He nods, face smug with understanding. "I never said those words, but I'm assuming you're referring to the part where I said you were in love with her. Got it. Yes, nothing simple about that."

"Would you keep your voice down, please?" I hiss. "In case you forgot, given my impending wedding, it would be a lot less simple if I *wasn't* in love with her."

He squints, temporarily struggling to keep up. “Right.” He shakes his head. “You know, I think maybe we’ve moved past keeping anything about this simple.”

“Fine. Let’s just drop it and talk about something else,” I counter. I didn’t want to talk about this in the first place.

“Great. Let’s talk about the three Americans arriving in two days.”

I roll my eyes. “You can call Chase by his name, you know. You’ve spent plenty of time with him over the years to identify him more specifically than just an American. And why are there only three? I thought Chase said he was bringing a plus one?”

“Fine. Chase and two Americans,” he pauses for dramatic effect, “are set to arrive in Linden by ten twenty on said morning. As per your request, they’re flying first class on the only overnight flights I could find on such short notice, allowing them plenty of rest and a full day to start the fun of pre-wedding festivities upon their arrival. The plus one in question is set to arrive the following day due to a scheduling conflict, Chase’s doing, not mine.” The way he rattles this information off almost makes it sound like a speech he rehearsed. He didn’t, of course, but this sort of information exchange between us is so common, it’s hard not to make it sound like he’s said the same words a hundred times over. Because in some form, he has.

“Great.” I nod to show my appreciation for his efforts. “How did we do on the accommodations? Did you run into any obstacles compliments of the queen?”

He smirks. “I mean, I’m sure she thought they were obstacles, but,” he stops briefly, letting his gaze shift sideways implying sneaky actions were taken, “I’d like to think I used them to our advantage.”

“How?” I’m not doubting him. Soren is nothing if not crafty. I’m just curious for entertainment’s sake. Truthfully, I could do with the distraction. So far, nothing has managed to take away the lingering thoughts of Greer floating at the forefront of my mind. Right now, I’d welcome just about any topic of conversation capable of snuffing them out.

“Well, I was told all the available quarters in the East Wing were either blocked off for tours – which are overbooked with a wedding in the works, or far too shabby and in need of updating before they can be deemed appropriate for any guest of the court, which of course, no one has time for.” He turns out to the side a bit to get a better view of the room and anyone who might try to join our conversation before he goes on, “Bea let slip the queen of villainous affairs ordered three suites to be cleaned for company.” His eyes dart left and right and I’m starting to think he’s more concerned with building the suspense than any curious bystanders trying to overhear us. Not that there are many of those here. It’s just my father and brother celebrating with us and they’re engulfed in a game of chess across the room. There are a handful of servants passing through every so often to wait on our every whim, but even those haven’t come near us since before we started this chat.

“Are you going to get to the point of this story?” I ask when his intentional pause drags on.

“Yes,” he says, “and you’ll appreciate it when I do.”

“Because you’ll finally stop talking?”

“Because it’s a good one.” He wiggles his brows at me, unbothered by my dig at his endless rambling. “Suite number one,” he starts a countdown using his fingers, “the Elm Room on the second floor of the *corps de logis* for Chase.”

“That’s the room directly above my grandmother’s. No one stays in the Elm Room. Ever.” My grandmother can’t stand to hear footsteps on the ceiling, but she refuses to leave her quarters on the *piano nobile*, which is historically known to hold the finest rooms in the castle, and thus is the only

level fit for her former majesty. As arguing with her is a senseless task, it was easier to just retire the space above hers. Until now, it seems.

“Yes. This was, I believe, your step-ghoul’s first mistake.” He holds up finger number two. “The second suite she requested for your female American friend was the underwater room.” Called that due to a pipe breakage and massive water leak that spread through the entire ceiling and left the room, quite literally, under water. Prior to that, it was referred to as the West End, as it’s the very last room at the very end of the West Wing. “Let me get this straight, the East Wing rooms are too outdated for company, but mold and mildew lining the walls isn’t a problem?”

“Yes, I like to call this, mistake number two.” He grins. “Lastly, we have her third choice.” His ring finger pops up to join the other two already erect. “The Elite.”

Linden’s finest hotel. But still. “That’s not even on property! You’re telling me, we don’t have a single room to spare here that Abbas can stay in?”

“I’m telling you we didn’t have a single room to spare that would create varying degrees of discomfort for the inhabitant while simultaneously aiding in keeping all of you separated from each other as much as possible,” he says flatly. “But the queen of wicked wishes overplayed her hand this time.” He grins again. “As soon as I heard she intended for Chase to stay in the Elm Room, I paid your grandmother a visit to formally apologize for the inconvenience this would cause her. She, in turn, promptly declared it was out of the question, and absolutely no one was to so much as tiptoe into that room. Then she went on to say that Chase was your brother and your problem and therefore, should stay with you.”

Slowly, my mouth begins to stretch into a smile as well. “Smooth.”

“Oh, but I’m just getting started.” He chuckles. “Next, I went to your father to ask his permission to convert the study across from the Underwater Room into a sort of tearoom for the bride and her maid of honor to convene in when they were on that side of the castle. You should have seen your father’s face. I think it took him a good three minutes to fully put together the fact his wife intended for another human being to sleep in that suite.” He laughs quietly. “Anyway, he quickly surrendered to the reality that he has no clue what’s going on in this place and thus couldn’t possibly offer another room to the cause, which left me to helplessly offer the only suggestion I had available to me, suggest Mallory stay in the Ivory Suite with Greer.” He nods, satisfied with his own achievements in meddling and manipulation. “Naturally, he was thrilled with the idea and told me to make it happen. Which I did. Someone will be by to turn the corner nook of windows which isn’t being used for anything but light and view enjoyment into a second sleeping area.”

“You’re kind of a genius,” I admit. “Tell me, how did you save poor Abbas from his fate?”

“To be honest, I was a bit torn. Part of me felt bad about dragging him back to this dysfunctional wreckage of royal life.”

“But you still made it happen.”

“Indeed, I did. Only took one little anonymous phone call to let the press know someone from the royal wedding party was staying at the Elite to have the place crawling with members of the media. Of course, for safety reasons, this ended Abbas’s reservation there.”

“And now he’s staying?” I ask, but I have a feeling I know where this is going.

“Did you know the sofa in your sitting room is a pullout?”

“It’s not.”

He pats my shoulder. “It is now.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GREER The forced polite small talk goes on for another hour before one of the maids announces the gentlemen have returned to escort us back to our personal quarters. My mother doesn't get a gentleman escort. She gets Berta, a darling little old woman who peels potatoes in the kitchen. Apparently, my mother's room is near hers. Judging by the look on my mother's face when this information is exchanged, it's the first she's learning of her stay among the servants' quarters.

"You look like you just crawled out of a warzone," Lachlan mutters under his breath as he takes my hand and places it in the crook of his arm, leading me down the hall and away from the rest of our party.

"Well, I did get locked in a room with both of our mothers for the last two hours," I mumble.

"I still can't believe Myrna resorted to bringing your mother here," he says, his voice gradually getting louder the farther away we get from the others. "I'm so sorry you have to be stuck with her and pretend to be okay with it."

"Don't worry," I tell him. "I dealt with it. She'll be gone tomorrow."

"How?"

I shrug. "I agreed to hear her out in exchange for her swift departure. Turns out, she has no interest in getting her slice of my royal life."

He frowns. "Then what did she come here for?"

My mouth opens to tell him, but the words don't come. Finally, I close my lips together again and start over. "Forgiveness." It's not the same as redemption, but maybe it's close enough. "She wanted to tell her side of the story." That much at least is true.

"And do you?"

"Do I what?" My mind is too busy racing in circles trying to sort out why my brain is stopping my mouth from telling him everything to keep up with this conversation. Because it's Lachlan and up until this very moment, telling him everything has always been easy. Eerily natural even.

"Forgive her?"

Do I? "I think so." My father has wanted me to for years. I had to hear it all from her to get there. Had to see clearly that she was simply too weak to do better by us. Forgiving her seems easier somehow when it feels unfair to expect more from her. The kind of more she's clearly not capable of.

"I'm still sorry." His voice is quiet again and it takes me a second to realize it's because he's upset and not because we've been joined by someone not meant to overhear us.

"What are you sorry about?" As far as I can tell, he didn't have anything to do with this. He doesn't even truly know the reasons behind my mother's absence.

"If you hadn't let me turn your whole world upside down, none of this would be happening right now. Your mother would still be out of the picture and you'd still be at peace with it, not churning up past hurts and forcing your way through them just to keep putting on a happy front, which you're also doing because I asked you to."

"First of all," I remind him, "you didn't ask me to do anything. I offered. Some might even say I coerced you into agreeing to let me come here and do this with you. And second." I sigh, the emotional exhaustion of tonight finally catching up with me. "This thing we're doing here, it's one thing I know I'll never be sorry about." It's a truth I've known since I made the decision and I've never felt otherwise. Tonight, hearing myself say the words out loud they sound different somehow.

Maybe the words haven't changed, but the context has. Whether I want to admit it or not, my mother's message of warning isn't one I've never heeded. It's a whispered caution lingering at the back of my mind every time I get attached to anyone. Despite having inherited my father's loyalty, I've also come by my mother's ambitious streak. I've spent my entire life wondering which of the two would win out if put to the test and I've never allowed myself to wind up in a situation I might have to find out I'm just as weak as she is.

Now can be no different. A reality that becomes starkly clear as I repeat my own words inside my head. I'll never be sorry I agreed to come here. To help Lachlan. To help Mo. Not to fall for the Prince of Linden and risk hurting him and his daughter more than they would have been had I never come around in the first place.

As much as I've pretended to deny my own feelings, watching the hurt in his eyes that aches on my behalf, hearing the worry in his voice, it's all too clear to me that I've let things go way too far between us.

If I want to finish what I started here, these feelings need to stop. For both of us. There's only one way I can see to do that.

"Besides," I say, shifting my voice to a careless, flat tone. "It's all pretend anyway, right? When I go back home, real life will return and all of this, including my mother, will cease to exist again."



LACHLAN

I WANT TO SAY NO. WITH every fiber of my being, I want to say, no, this is not pretend. It's real. All of it. And nothing and no one will ever undo what has come to life between us, but I can't. What I realized at dinner is only amplified here in this conversation with her.

Being here with me is causing her to shut down parts of her heart. And the Greer I know, the one I met in New York, is fading rapidly right before my eyes. And I can no longer pretend that it's all part of her act. Despite her very convincing efforts to lead me to believe that's all this is. It's not.

So, I lie. Same as she does.

"I suppose you're right." I refocus my eyes to look straight ahead. "I'm still glad your mother is leaving before the wedding. We don't need any more challenges than necessary when we're so close to pulling it off."

"Speaking of challenges," she says, changing the subject and turning to face me just enough to cause her hand to slip from my arm and putting her at a greater distance from me as we continue to walk. It's such a subtle move and slight change, I can't tell if it just happened or if it was intentional. "Katia mentioned the sleeping arrangements for Chase and them was still being worked out," she goes on casually. "Any idea what's going on?"

I nod. "My stepmother."

"Shocking." Even her sarcasm is subdued.

"Soren straightened everything out," I assure her. "As long as you don't mind being roommates with Mallory."

"The woman who is *actually* my roommate?" She cocks a bewildered brow at me. "No, I don't think I'll mind that."

"Expect to see plenty of Chase and Abbas too," I tell her, slowing down as we reach our destination. "They're bunking with me through the wedding."

“So just like home then,” she concludes with a small smile. I want to ask if she misses it, home. But I don’t. Instead, I reach for her door handle in silence and lead her inside her suite.

“I’m afraid we won’t be seeing each other much the next few days,” I mumble, lingering in the open doorway.

“Royal things?” she asks, but her voice is missing the disappointment it had on previous occasions.

“Yes,” I confirm, nodding more often than necessary. “Between the wedding and the coronation, we have a lot of loose ends to tie up to ensure a smooth transition.”

“Good,” she says, nodding only once but in slow-motion and I can’t help but feel we’re both struggling with our desires to agree with things we don’t have our hearts in. “A smooth transition is what we want.”

“Yes.” More nodding. I need to get out of this doorway. “Well, have a good night.” I turn and start into the hall. I get halfway to my own door before I spin back around. “If you need anything –“

“I’ll call Soren,” she finishes for me.

“Exactly.” I catch myself before my head starts shaking up and down again. Then, I force myself to march through my own door and close it behind me without so much as looking up to see if she’s done the same.

The next days pass with even less contact than anticipated and we hardly cross paths outside of dinners and the occasions we happen to be coming or going at the same time. Where before I would stumble upon Greer in Monroe’s room, playing or reading, now I’m told she hasn’t even come by once to visit.

By the time we’re standing outside on the front steps of the castle, waiting to greet my brother and our friends, the distance between us is a screaming silence I’m not sure I know how to overcome. And I don’t want to. However, I’m starting to worry the shift in our relationship is becoming noticeable. No one has said anything, not even Soren, still, I can’t help thinking it must be obvious.

“You look beautiful,” I tell her as she slides her hand into mine. Before I was certain there was a genuine affection in the gesture, now it’s every bit the formality it was always meant to be.

“You’re looking very handsome yourself,” she says with a smile that never reaches her eyes. I know I should be grateful she’s making this so easy. Meeting my distance with her own. But I can’t deny the increasing ache in my heart every time I’m forced to face the fact our engagement is nothing but the act it was intended as.

“Soren said you requested lunch be brought to your loft today.”

She nods. “Lunch for two.” She smiles again. This time it’s more genuine. “I have a feeling Mal is going to need some one-on-one time when she gets here.”

That reminds me. “Any progress on the Mallory and Abbas front?”

“If by progress you mean Mal requesting that I set her up with someone from Linden for the wedding, so she doesn’t have to admit Abbas is her date, then yes.”

I almost laugh at that. But I felt the cool stare of my stepmother boring into the side of my head a moment ago and stop myself. “Were you able to find her a suitable escort?”

She shrugs ever so slightly. Apparently, she’s also aware of the queen’s presence. “I told Soren he had to pretend to be her date. He agreed, but only because I promised him she’d crack and spill her Abbas feelings all over the place before the wedding, thus relieving him of his obligations.”

I sigh, allowing myself a second of comfort in this middle ground where we’re almost the same two people we were before everything went awry. “Glad to hear you have it all under control.”

“All part of a future queen’s duties, I’m sure.” She sounds serious, but the corners of her mouth curve just enough to give her away.

Then, before either of us can get lost in the familiar chit chat any further, the car arrives. And with it, Chase, Abbas and Mallory.

As this isn’t Chase’s first visit, he knows to stay in the car until a footman arrives to open the door and direct him onward toward the stairs. Abbas and Mallory either don’t notice the attempt at formalities, or they simply don’t care. In any event, the car hasn’t even come to a complete stop, when the first door swings open and Mallory practically leaps out, Abbas scrambling after her.

“Can you at least wait until we’re not moving?” he huffs loud enough for half of Linden to hear, catching her elbow just as she loses her balance. “If you’re not careful, your face is going to get up close and personal with Linden’s asphalt.”

“Rude.” She shakes her arm free from his grip. “If you hadn’t pushed me out in such a hurry, I never would have tripped.”

I can see his mouth move in response, but as we’ve only made it halfway down the steps to greet their disaster, I can’t make out the words.

Several members of the castle staff make it to Mallory and Abbas before we do and by the time we reach them, both are upright and joined by Chase who is endlessly amused by their embarrassing antics.

“I can’t believe you were running late to meet me,” Mallory chides Greer even as she’s wrapping both arms around her friend in an enthusiastic hug.

“I was not running late,” Greer responds indignantly, still fully engulfed by their embrace.

“I literally saw you running to get here,” Mallory insists, slowly releasing her.

“Yes, running to get *here*.” Greer gestures at the sidewalk and adjoining circular driveway before turning around to point up the stairs and to the landing we were standing on. “Because we were up there, waiting. Not running late. Perfectly punctual. So punctual in fact, we had time to watch your car make the whole loop before you fell out of the backseat.”

Mallory makes a face. “If you were early, why didn’t you come down?”

“Because it’s not proper for the royals to meet their guests in the driveway,” Chase chimes in as he steps around their craziness to shake my hand. “They don’t hug either. You have to wait until you’re in private, which by the way only happens in the bathroom, or possibly a closet, around here.”

“Oh.” Mallory looks temporarily stumped.

“Do I shake your hands too?” Abbas asks, sliding both hands into his pockets even as he’s asking as if to make sure he doesn’t do the wrong thing with them before hearing proper protocol.

“Technically, you’re expected to bow,” I inform him. “But technicalities seem pretty obsolete at this point.” I reach out to pat his shoulder, since his hands are both tucked away. “Come on, let’s go up the stairs and start over.”

“You want us to say hello a second time?” Mallory asks from right behind Greer, who has naturally fallen in at my side again as we make our way up to the landing.

“Not to us,” I explain. “My father and stepmother, the king and queen, are up there waiting to welcome you into their home.”

“Definitely do the technical thing and bow,” Chase warns under his breath. “Apsel is cool in a closet too, but the queen is all about formalities.”

“I heard she’s scary,” Abbas hisses.

“She is,” Greer confirms without looking back. “Super scary. Like, make your knees wobble when you’re near her scary, which makes bowing or dropping down into a curtsy especially

precarious.”

“What happens if your wobbly knees make you fall on your face?” Mallory whispers in a panic.

“The dungeon.” Chase doesn’t even skip a beat jumping in on that one.

“You all really have one of those?” Abbas asks, clearly torn about whether to believe Chase or call his bluff and laugh. I don’t blame him. Chase is my brother and half the time I still can’t tell when he’s being serious or when he’s messing with me.

“We do,” I admit. “But we hardly ever use them.” I can’t help myself. Chase laid the perfect foundation.

“I’ll have Cheese bring you bits of crackers if you wind up down there,” Greer offers.

“You’re all assholes,” Abbas mutters under his breath. “Royal assholes.”

“So fancy,” Greer muses but she refrains from smirking the way she normally would. We’ve reached the top of the stairs, and with them, my parents.

While there would certainly be entertaining aspects to drawing out introductions between Myrna, Mallory and Abbas, there’s still the one undeniable fact that I simply don’t enjoy my stepmother’s company. And so, I do my best to hurry the introductions along, for no other reason than I’m ready to get away from her.

As always, Soren meets us just inside the grand doors, falling into step beside me and rattling on a mile a minute about everything he thinks I need to know right this very minute.

“Lunch is set to be served in each of your suites at precisely twelve o’clock. Maids are awaiting the luggage on both sides of the hall to unpack and press whatever requires it. And Katia has just notified me that Simon Sidka has arrived and will be escorted to your formal sitting room for the final fitting of your wedding day attire. She also informed me of Anke’s impending arrival, though your father has requested a visit over coffee and biscuits with her prior to her joining Greer and her bridal party in the tearoom.”

I frown. “Which tearoom?”

He clears his throat. “The queen’s. She insisted.” He lets out an audible sigh. “It was either this or have her bring her entourage to Greer’s loft.”

“Tearoom works.” I glance sideways at Greer. Her expression is neutral, but I can tell from the way she keeps straightening her shoulders, she heard.

“There should be plenty of time for everyone to freshen up before their final fittings. The kitchen is on hold for any requests in terms of refreshments.” He pauses while we make the final turn toward our rooms. “Also, I left a copy of your brother’s schedule on your desk for your review.”

“Chase has his own schedule?” I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. My stepmother isn’t exactly fond of him.

“No. Your other brother,” Soren says stiffly. “Seems he’s volunteered himself to fill in as needed during your absence while you prepare for your big day.”

“Oh.” That does surprise me. “I wasn’t aware anything was scheduled that required my physical presence.” There are plenty of things for which I would ordinarily be present, but none come to mind for which an appearance in person would be necessary. Certainly not any that my brother would deem worthy of his royal time.

“There wasn’t. Until her royal wench of backstabbing decided to move some things around.” Soren sighs and it’s filled with his usual exasperated annoyance. “Just look it over and tell me what you want me to cancel or make room for in your schedule.”

I nod, coming to a stop in the hall. We’ve reached our destination.

“I don’t suppose we’ll cross paths again until dinner,” I say, turning to face Greer.

“Maybe not even then,” she says, smiling strangely. “Mallory and I have a lot of catching up to do. I may just request that Katia arranges a private dinner to follow up our private lunch.” She shrugs. “Make it a whole girls only day.” She hooks her arm into Mallory’s and spins her toward the door before I can say anything. “Well, girls only, plus Cheese.” And then, just like that, they’re inside and the door flies shut behind them.

“That was weird,” Abbas remarks.

“It’s almost like you didn’t take my advice,” Chase says dryly, helping himself to the door handle and leading the way into my suite using the key he’s had since I moved into the East Wing.

“Did your advice involve telling him not to complicate things with Greer?” Soren says, apparently joining us for the time being since he’s followed us inside and closed the door behind him. “Because that’s the advice I gave, and he definitely didn’t make good use of it.”

“What are you talking about?” As far as I can tell, that’s exactly what I did. “Nothing is complicated between me and Greer. Everything is going precisely according to plan.”

Soren snorts.

Chase lets out a ‘ha!’ as he plops down into my sofa.

Abbas is kind enough to stay silent, though I notice his stare and cocked brow are saying plenty.

“Right.” My brother is the first to make use of his vocabulary again. “That’s why we’re having separate boys’ and girls’ meals our first day here.” He laughs. “We can’t even get those back home where we see each other every damn day.”

“Yeah,” Abbas agrees. “I don’t think you can talk your way out of this weirdness. Something obviously went down. And my guess is Greer is telling Mal all about it as we speak.”

“No doubt. So, stop holding out on us. What was it?” Chase asks, and I can already see the signs of his smug smirk making an appearance.

“What was what?”

“The thing you both freaked out about?” Chase clarifies.

“Oh,” Soren pipes up again. “I know this one. It was her mom showing up. Really screwed them both up.” He’s enjoying this. And not just the part where he thinks he’s so superior to me. No, it’s the part where he finally has a community of people who like to point out that they’re so superior to me. At least when it comes to my level of emotional intelligence. Which everyone seems to think is severely lacking.

“Hold up.” Abbas finally has words to use. “Greer’s mom is here?”

“She was,” I explain. “She’s gone now.”

“Why?” Chase seems temporarily thrown. “How?”

“You really can’t sort this one out for yourself?” Soren seems somewhat disappointed to find out he’s still the smartest person in the room. “Her wretched queen of foul play. How else?”

“You still need a why?” I ask, taking the jabs where I can grasp them.

“Well, I can definitely see how that fucked Greer up,” Abbas mumbles, going to take a seat beside my brother. “But why did you freak out?”

“Yeah,” Soren adds, sitting on the edge of the coffee table, a move I’ve never seen him make before today. Apparently, having the guys here is bringing a whole new level of comfort to our relationship. “Why did you freak out? And don’t say you didn’t. I read that speech you wrote and then didn’t use.”

“I didn’t use it because you said it wasn’t any good,” I remind him.

He shakes his head. “I never said that. I said it was perfectly fine. If you wanted her to know that you’re in love with her.”

“In love, huh?” Chase is grinning from ear to ear now. “That must really be messing up Greer’s life.”

“Should you be so entertained by this?” I ask, taking a stand at the center of the room. There’s no way I’m sitting down. This is the only high ground left to me.

“Seems fair. I’ve been laughing at you both since you brought her here and told me it was all pretend. Which it clearly wasn’t.” Soren’s grinning too.

“Plus, I’m going to help you fix the mess you both made, so you won’t even remember this part,” Chase says.

“There’s no mess,” I insist.

“Right.” Even Abbas doesn’t believe me. He turns toward Chase. “So, I’ll talk to Mal after lunch? Find out how screwed up Greer is over her mom?”

“Yep.” Chase nods. “And in the meantime, let’s see this speech Soren mentioned.”

“Absolutely not.” I shake my head in an adamant no.

“I made a copy,” Soren offers, whipping out his phone and tapping away at the screen for a second before handing the whole thing over to my brother.

I make my way to the nearest chair, have a seat, and surrender.

“The name Greer means ‘watchful’,” he reads out loud. “And I can’t think of a more perfect word to share with you tonight as I try to give you a glimpse of the woman who found my absent heart and claimed it, and who couldn’t be better suited as Linden’s queen because she shares this one specific trait with her name. Watchful.”

“Oh shit, here we go,” Abbas mumbles under his breath causing him and Chase to exchange a look before the latter continues.

“I could tell you, how her beauty takes my breath away or how much harder it’s been to take life seriously since she’s been around, making me laugh at every turn. I could say that she’s smart and thoughtful and strong, and those would all be admirable traits of hers worth sharing. But they wouldn’t tell you nearly enough.” He takes a moment to clear his throat before he goes on. “They wouldn’t tell you how she can watch a horde of children running wild on the playground and never lose sight of any of them. Or how she makes jokes in order to get to the heart of something serious, because somehow everything is easier to talk about that way. You wouldn’t see how she can eliminate your fears or worries before you even voice them, or how she can swoop in and bring a smile back to the two-year-old whose frustration has mounted due to being misunderstood or the way she guards her own heart by guarding those most precious to her.” Chase stops, eyes meeting mine for a moment before he reads the final piece out loud. “And most importantly, you wouldn’t understand how she found and collected all the parts of my heart I placed where I thought they were needed, with Linden, with Monroe, with my family here and my family there, with my grief and my duty...she found them all. And she brought them home to me, made me whole in the moment I needed it most. Because she was watching, truly seeking to see what could be easily missed. I trust Greer to guard my heart, and the heart of my daughter. To stand at my side and be watchful over Linden. Because that’s the heart of who she is. And it’s that heart I fell in love with.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GREER
“How about now?” Mal asks as soon as we’re alone. Well, sort of alone. Katia is here as well. But the boys are gone, so it’s alone enough.

“How about now, what?” I purposely avoid eye contact and start marching for the coffee bar. Katia in all her infinite awesomeness already started a fresh pot for us.

“Now do you want to go ahead and tell me how you’re in love with him and how I was right, and you were wrong, and this is the biggest mistake ever?” she spells it out for me. Not that I needed her to. And truthfully, I would have preferred she hadn’t.

“Wait.” Katia frowns. “Why wouldn’t she be in love with him? And what exactly is the biggest mistake ever?”

Right around now, Mal realizes her own mistake. “Oops.”

“Thanks.” I make a face at her but refrain from saying any more. To her, anyway. I now have plenty that needs to be said to Katia. “Lachlan and I...we’re having sort of an arranged marriage.”

Apparently, this just makes things more confusing. “Who arranged it?”

“We did.” I sigh. “I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to put you in the position of knowing this thing you really shouldn’t know because the queen will be livid if she ever finds out and anyone who knew about it will no doubt suffer her wrath.”

“Am I going to know now?”

“Do you want to know? You can still choose not to. Stay in the dark where it’s safe.” I’ve thought about telling her countless times since our relationship shifted. I’ve wanted a friend I could confide in, one who was in the middle of it all with me, but it just didn’t seem fair to burden her with the risks we chose to take on.

Katia comes to meet me at the coffee bar. “You have to tell me. I don’t want to be safe if you’re not. I want to help you.”

Given the many imaginary attempts I made at sharing this secret with her, the words fall out pretty easily once she gives the official green light to let the floodgates open. By the time I’m done telling her everything, she doesn’t even look all that surprised.

“I see now,” she says, slowly nodding her head.

“Yeah?” I think I covered everything pretty efficiently, though I did ramble on in a few different aimless directions once or twice along the way.

“Yeah.” She sounds pretty set on it. “Mallory is right. You’re definitely in love with him and given your arrangement, I can see where this could turn out to be the biggest mistake of your life.”

“That...no. It’s not going to be a mistake,” I try to assure her. Them. Me. I’m not sure any of us are buying it though.

“Oh,” Katia looks like she actually agrees with me. “No, I know it’s not. But it could easily have taken a turn in that direction. If he wasn’t also stupid in love with you.”

I can feel my nostrils flare on the next exhale. “You people really need to stop saying stuff like that.”

“Maybe you need to start listening,” Mal says. Apparently, now’s a good time to jump back into this conversation. “And also start talking. Because I didn’t see two people stupid in love with each other out in that hall. I just saw two people being stupid.”

“That was you and Abbas,” I counter, feeling a tad on the defensive. “Also, the angry little red head? That’s your date to my wedding.”

Katia scowls. “I thought Mallory was your best friend.” She turns toward Mal. “Even if you didn’t have a really attractive alternative, you really should think twice before choosing Soren as your escort.”

“No!” Mal steps between us, wagging her index finger at both of us. “We tackle one screwed up love life at a time. And as I’m not in danger of fake marrying the man I’m pretending not to be in love with, mine’s not the one we’re starting with.”

I can feel my shoulders collapse in around my chest like armor around my heart. There’s no getting out of this. I may as well just open the can of worms with a big ol’ pop. “My mother was here.”

“Oh.” Mal’s reaction isn’t quite pop worthy.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Katia at least shows some interest in the revelation.

“Because,” Mal answers before I get the chance, “Greer’s mom walked out on their family to pursue her career and somehow, because Greer has aspirations of being successful one day too, this means she can’t fall in love or have a family because she may at some point turn her back on them, thus destroying those she loves the way her mother destroyed her.”

“I’m pretty sure women can have marriages and careers,” Katia says slowly, frowning again. “They can even be mothers. It’s a thing now. We can have it all. Especially when you marry into royalty. The castle has a full staff of nannies.”

“Yes,” I agree. “But how many acting jobs come along in Linden? How many movies are in production here over the course of a year?” I shake my head. “Don’t you see? One way or the other, I’ll have to give something up. And if anyone is going to make sacrifices for my dream, it’s going to be me.”

“It’s bullshit.” But Mal doesn’t expound beyond that. Just takes an empty mug from the collection and pours herself a cup of coffee. “Alright. Now we can talk about me and Abbas.”



LACHLAN

NOT LONG AFTER CHASE got his hands on my original speech, Simon was ready for us. I don’t think I’ve ever been more pleased to have to try on clothes. To make matters even more promising, Chase and Abbas both made mistakes when taking their measurements, and thus, both of their suits require a significant amount of pinning and adjusting, which means the conversation about me and Greer is tabled at least for the time being.

It’s not until we’re changing back into our own clothes, Simon is packing up and Abbas sneaks off to have a not-so-secret, secret rendezvous with Mallory, that Chase starts in on me again. At least this time, he’s alone. Even Soren isn’t around since he took off on some official business or another shortly after the fitting started. To be honest, I think he just didn’t want to stick around to watch a bunch of guys get dressed up and stand around like male mannequins.

“You have to tell her how you feel.”

“I can’t.” I’ve been over it a million times already. If Chase wants to go a million and one, I’m ready. I have my reasons. And they can’t be swayed or argued away.

“Because you think she doesn’t feel the same way?”

I shake my head, keeping my eyes on my shirt while I finish buttoning it up again. “Because I know she does. And if I tell her I love and that I want her to stay, she will.”

“Please, keep making my argument for me,” he teases, bending down to tie his shoes.

“I can’t let her stay.” I reach the last of my buttons and almost start to undo them again just for something to do.

“Because she’s an aspiring actress and Linden has but one pathetic theater and no TV or Film industry to speak of?” Done with his shoes, he stands upright and moves directly in front of me, making it impossible for me to continue to casually ignore him while we have this chat.

“Because she’s disappearing. The longer she’s here, the less Greer she is. And I can’t let Linden snuff out all the parts of her I fell in love with to begin with.” The acting thing is an excuse too easy to lean into and even easier to erase. We might not have acting gigs to spare, but we have planes. She could fly to any audition or job she ever wanted. It would require a longer commute than hopping on the subway, but it could be done. It would be done. If she stayed. Which she won’t.

“Oh, good. Mommy issues on both sides.” Oddly enough, I sense some sympathy in his mockery. “Has it occurred to you, that maybe she’s less Greer not because she’s in Linden but because she’s overcompensating in her acting on account of trying to hide how much she’s not pretending when she’s walking around being all in love with you and shit?”

No.

“It started before we left,” I point out. “That morning, in her fake fiancée outfit with her new fake fiancée hair, that’s when it started.”

“Yeah.” He nods. “I was there. She was acting then. In costume. Doing legit acting. Because she agreed to be your fake fiancée.”

“Yeah. But why should being my fiancée, fake or otherwise, require her to change? Why didn’t I just insist on bringing her home exactly as she was?”

Chase flat out laughs at me. “Probably because you both needed reminding that everything was pretend. And creating a fake personality and look to go with the fake engagement was a good way to do that.” He rolls his eyes. “Get real, Lachlan. Neither of you would have agreed to pretend and not pretend when you were both already so clearly into each other, which was, of course, the only reason either of you agreed to pretend in the first place.” He stops there until he notices me staring at him. “Don’t even act like you didn’t follow all of that.”

I did. I don’t feel good about it, but that actually made perfect sense. “So, I have to tell her how I feel.”

He nods. “You have to tell her how you feel.”

“Tonight. After dinner.” Now that it’s decided, dinner seems like a painfully long time to wait. On the other hand, it’ll give me time to do something I’ve wanted to do since the night of our official engagement dinner. “First, I need to go see my father.”

Chase doesn’t even ask why. And next thing I know, I’m bursting into my father’s study. Thankfully, he’s alone.

“You look upset.” He stands from his desk, concern furrowing his brow as soon as he sees me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Everything. Everything between me and Greer and how we ended up here, is all wrong. But we can still make it right. “I was wondering if it was too late to choose mom’s ring.”

He chuckles and I can hear his relief in the sound. “It’s never too late for that.” He walks out from his desk to meet me. “The way you looked storming in here, I was afraid you were about to tell me the wedding was off.”

“That would be bad timing, huh,” I joke though we both know there’s not much funny about it.

My father takes it more seriously than I expected. “Timing,” he says quietly, his hand moving out to gesture for us to sit in the overstuffed leather chairs near the window. “You’re not rushing this wedding on my account, are you?”

“Honestly?” It suddenly feels like I have a lot of catching up to do in that department. “It seemed like the smoothest way to put an end to the which son will be the heir debate.”

My father leans back in his chair, one hand resting on his knee, the other coming up under his chin. “I wasn’t aware it was up for debate.”

“You weren’t aware that Myrna and Grandmother have been making an ongoing case against my taking the crown. That they’ve been digging up every last outdated loophole to prove me unfit as king so that Apsel can take my place?”

“No, I was aware of that.” He smiles sadly. “But I wasn’t aware you believed their efforts had any merit.” He clasps both hands in his lap and leans toward me. “Outdated though our policies may be, ultimately, only the current living king can choose his successor. And that, my boy, means only I can say who is fit and who isn’t.”

“You don’t think Apsel represents the better choice?” He’s never voiced it, but deep down I’ve always wondered if he chose me out of obligation or out of need to make up for the years we missed during my childhood. Or if he honestly believes I’m the best choice to rule over the land and the people he’s loved so dearly all of his life.

“I think Apsel would honor the crown and do right by Linden,” he says. “But, Lachlan, his heart wouldn’t be in it. Not the way it is for you.”

“And you would choose me to be king?” I ask, carefully formulating the rest of my thoughts before I say them out loud. “Even if your wife and mother advised against it. Even if I wasn’t married. Or even engaged. And even if I was raising a child born under scandalous circumstances with no blood relation to me or the royal family?”

My father’s concern from before returns. “Yes, I would.” His fingertips tap his mouth thoughtfully. “Lachlan,” he starts again, but I stop him.

“My mother’s ring,” I tell him. “It’s the one I should have chosen to begin with.”

My father doesn’t ask any more questions after that. Instead, he lights up and insists on ushering me down to the vault immediately to rectify my previous mistake.

Once the ring is securely tucked in my pocket, I realize there’s someone else I still need to speak to.

“Do you have a few moments?” I ask, poking my head inside the Rose library. Since Apsel’s been old enough to read, this has been the one place he can nearly always be found.

My brother looks up from his book, it looks like an antique and must have at least a thousand pages. “Is this about my stepping in to take your place at some meeting or another?”

“No.”

He closes the book and places it on the table beside his chair. “Then, yes.”

I step inside and close the door behind me. “I just...I guess I wanted to say I’m sorry. I know it’s been a bit of a whirlwind, me getting married and our father retiring and...the coronation coming up.”

His brow twitches as though he might frown but it doesn’t stick. Instead, he laughs a bit strangely. “I’m not sure those are things you need to apologize for.”

“Maybe I’m apologizing for any way you may have gotten caught up in the insanity,” I say awkwardly, trying my best to say I’m sorry for stealing the crown he grew up believing would be his one day without literally putting it into words.

Judging by the gradual smile forming on his face, I think he understands. “You mean my mother’s insanity.”

Maybe he understands even better than I thought. “I mean...everything around this crazy heir business, I guess.”

He sits up a little taller. He’s starting to grin now. “Want to know the craziest part of it all?”

To be honest, right now, I’m not sure I can handle it, but I owe my brother an attempt. “Sure.”

“I never wanted to be king.”

“What?” Nothing could be farther from the words I expected to hear. “I thought that’s why you’ve always hated me. Because I showed up out of nowhere to claim the thing you were essentially bred for.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I was definitely bred for it.” He shakes his head, looking at his hands for several long moments before he raises his eyes to meet mine. “That’s why I hated you. Because you got to leave and have this totally normal childhood with your other brother, while I was stuck here, alone, being groomed by my mother for a role I was never going to play and a throne I never wanted to sit on.”

“So, all this time...” I’m not sure I can even wrap my head around it.

“I should have said something sooner.” The smile fades from his face. “But my mother -”

He doesn’t have to finish his explanation. “I understand. You didn’t want to let her down.”

“She’s difficult, I know,” he admits. “But she *is* my mother.”

It takes a few minutes, both of us staying in place, remaining silent while we process the revelations that transpired between us.

“I’d really like it if things could be different between us moving forward.”

He looks up from where he’s been staring at his hands again. “I’d like that too.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GREER As hoped, I manage to secure a quiet dinner with just Mal. It's not even just Lachlan I'm avoiding. If I'm honest, I'm trying to put off any real conversations with Abbas and Chase until after the wedding. If I let anyone else get in my head and muddle things up, I may not be able to see straight anymore. And I need to. See straight. Now more than ever.

Mal, however, seems less concerned with seeing straight. She's all about blurring lines today.

"You don't mind if I slip out and peruse the castle a bit on my own?" she asks as soon as our plates have been cleared.

"I know you're trying to sneak off to see Abbas," I point out.

"Then can you play along and let me?" she huffs.

"Sure. Go peruse the castle a bit."

She smiles. "Thank you, I think I will." Then she dashes for the door. "Don't wait up."

With Katia gone as well, the loft feels empty for the first time since I've been here. Even Cheese is nowhere to be seen or heard.

For a moment, I just stand in the center of the room, taking in the silence and contemplating my plans for the night. It's too early to go to bed. Ordinarily, I'd stroll across the hall and crash whatever conversation is happening in Lachlan's room. But this isn't ordinary anymore.

I sigh, accepting the fact that I may have nothing better to do than binge-watch some old show I've watched too many times already when a knock at the door gives me new hope.

"Abbas wasn't perusing the castle to stage a casual run in with you?" I tease, making my way to the door to let Mal back in.

"I'm pretty sure Abbas is in the backseat of Soren's car making out with Mallory," Lachlan answers. "At least those were the plans he alluded to when he asked Soren for the keys."

"I thought you were Mal." I'm suddenly sorry I never learned the value of knowing who's on the other side of a door before answering it. I never wanted to be held to that same standard, so it seemed prudent not to practice such habits myself.

"I noticed." He smiles. A real smile. The sort I haven't seen from him in days. "Can I come in? There's something I need to tell you."

I swallow down my desires to tell him no and instead step aside to grant him entry. "Any new devious wedding detours compliments of your stepmother coming my way?"

"Actually," he says slowly, "No. Turns out, she no longer has the power to do that." He turns back to face me while I close the door. "Kind of turns out she never had the power to begin with."

I frown. "What are you talking about?"

He glances back and forth between me and the sofa across the room. "Can we sit?"

Sitting seems like a bad idea. Sitting will mean settling in and settling in will make the visit go on even after he says what he came here to say. And God only knows what I'll say when the time comes to fill the empty space between us. But, telling him no and having to explain why seems like an even worse idea. "We can sit."

He gestures for me to lead the way and I oblige.

When I take my seat it's intentionally at the very edge but sideways, so it seems for the sake of keeping eye contact while we talk and less for maintaining distance.

Lachlan seems less interested in personal space and chooses to sit smack in the middle of the sofa, though he also turns to face me. His face gets serious, but his eyes and mouth soften. Whatever he has to tell me isn't bad news.

"I went to see my father this afternoon," he starts.

"Oh?" The visit itself isn't at all unusual, but the fact it's worth mentioning is.

"I screwed something up and I needed his help to fix it." His brow furrows and the regret of whatever mistake he feels he made lingers on his handsome face for a second before he goes on, "He mentioned the wedding and how he hoped he wasn't making us feel pressured to maintain such a tight timeline. And it kind of opened the door to a conversation we really should have had a long time ago. Well, two conversations, if you count the one that followed with my brother."

"You're not surrendering the throne, are you?" Panic makes me sit a little taller.

"No." He shakes his head. "As it turns out, regardless of what my stepmother and grandmother have led me to believe these past months, no amount of loopholes can overrule or influence my father's choice." He takes a deep breath, and his smile returns. "And he chooses me. Whether I'm married or not. With Monroe as my daughter."

I should be elated by the news, but I'm struggling to convey it. "That's...amazing."

"It is." He nods. "Though I feel a little foolish having dragged you into this whole mess for all the wrong reasons."

His words shouldn't sting, but they do. "Trust me, after seeing the queen in action, I don't doubt she had you believing whatever she wanted you to." I shrug. "So, the engagement is off?"

"Yes." He reaches his hand into his pocket and retrieves a delicate, red velvet case. "The fake engagement is off." Carefully, he opens the small box. His hands are shaking, something I've never seen them do. Lachlan is nervous. "But I'm hoping a true engagement will take its place."

I stare at the ring glittering at me from the palm of his hand. "What?" I'm sure I'm not understanding what he's saying. "But you just said it was all for no reason."

"No, I said it was for all the *wrong* reasons. And I said I felt foolish, but not sorry." He takes my hand in his and I'm too shocked to stop him. "Greer, I should have seen right from the start what was motivating me to keep you close. To bring you here. To want to marry you."

"You want to marry me." I don't know why I repeat the words back to him. Maybe so he can hear for himself how insane they sound. Only when I hear my own voice say them out loud, they don't sound nearly as crazy as they did in my head. They actually sound kind of...wonderful.

"I want to marry you," he says again, his face lighting up in a way I haven't seen it do since we left New York.

New York. My home. My reality.

"Why?"

He laughs. "You really haven't figured it out yet? I would have thought you of all people, queen of the self-help section and goddess of insight would have seen right to the heart of the matter a long time ago. You certainly saw right to the heart of me." The laughter fades from his voice and it's replaced with a tenderness I've never heard from a man. "I'm in love with you, Greer Philladora Deluca. And I would very much like you to steal my half and half for the rest of my life." His eyes crinkle as his voice trails off.

"I was borrowing not stealing," I whisper. It's probably the world's most ridiculous response but it's the only one I can put into words. My mind and heart are battling for control of my mouth, and until one of them wins, I'm afraid nothing of substance is likely to come out.

“You can go ahead and freak out,” he says quietly. “I got this. I know what I’m doing. So, unravel and tell me all the reasons this is crazy. It’s not going to change what I know.”

“I can’t marry you.” I can’t even tell if it’s my head or my heart that won. Everything inside me goes numb the second I utter the words.

“You can,” he says. “The question is, do you want to?”

That’s not a fair question. Of course, I want to. “I can’t,” I repeat the only thought available to me. “I’m sorry. I just can’t.” Before he can say anything else to sway me, I move my hand from his and shoot upright to stand. “If your future as king and Mo’s father is secure here, I really think it’s best if I leave as soon as possible.” I take a step back. “We’ve both allowed ourselves to get caught up in the lie we told. This story we created about who we are to each other and the feelings we share, but it’s not real. And even if it feels like it is, the truth is, it can’t be. Because the person you think you love is a character I’ve been playing since I got here. It’s not who I really am.”

“Greer,” he starts again, still strangely calm and unhurt even as I’m throwing countless rejections his way. “You can try to rationalize away your fear from every angle, but it won’t change the truth. We didn’t believe our own lie. The lie just gave us the freedom to have our feelings without having to admit them or run scared at the first sight of them.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing.” He closes the ring box and places it on the coffee table before he gets to his feet as well. “This was the ring my father once gave to my mother, the love of his life. It’s yours to keep. Whether you choose to wear it or not, you’re the only woman in the world I’m ever going to want to give it to.” He holds my eyes with his for so long I start to feel dizzy. I can’t breathe when he looks at me this way. “Soren will make whatever arrangements you ask. And I’ll respect whatever you choose.”

Then he bends down to gently press his lips to the top of my head. I’ve never had a sweeter gesture conjure more physical pain. My entire chest hurts, and every breath sends a shooting pain through me like a dagger. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. And it only intensifies as I watch him walk to the door and disappear beyond it.

For a long while, I feel like I can’t move. Then, just as intensely as I felt frozen, rapid movement takes over. Motion. Action. It’s the only way to escape this pain.

Next thing I know, I’m up in my bedroom with my suitcase laid open on my bed. I’m practically jogging back and forth from my closet with arm loads of clothes, but my head is such a mess, I have to make repeat trips. I’ve acquired so many new clothes here, I can’t seem to wrap my brain around what goes and what stays at this moment.

Overwhelmed with the choices, I abandon the closet and head for the bathroom. At least I know all the toiletries are mine.

“Cheese,” I mutter. The only thing I absolutely can’t leave here without. I search the room for the nearest chip bag to crinkle. It turns out to be a box of crackers but shaking it around a bit should garner the same results.

“Come on, buddy,” I try to coax him out from wherever he’s hiding. “I have yummy crunchie things for you.” Absentmindedly, I reach inside and grab a handful, popping two in my mouth as I start to make my way to the stairs and back down. “Gross. Not crunchy,” I mutter to myself, giving the box another shake anyway. “Cheese, it’s time to go home. Don’t you miss home?” Even as I’m asking it, I don’t know how to answer it myself. Home. Somehow it feels like I don’t have one of those to go back to anymore. Like coming here turned my world so upside down, I’ve completely lost my place in it.

“Cheese!” I call out, simultaneously calling my wandering mind back to task. “Where are you?”

Back at ground level, I take things a step further and get down on all fours. The only time food isn’t enough to summon him is when he’s napping somewhere with a full belly.

Crawling along the large space, I stop at every piece of furniture and peek underneath. But it’s not until I reach the coffee bar, that I get lucky.

“Cheese?” I whisper, the side of my face pressed to the rug. “Is that you?”

Whatever I’m looking at isn’t entirely rat shaped, but I can hear him snoring so I’m reasonably confident it’s him, likely sleeping on something he snatched up somewhere and chose to snuggle up on. “Cheese?” I try again when he still doesn’t move. This time he reacts, but it’s just to get up and nest a second before he curls back up to go to sleep again. “Come on, man,” I grumble, reaching under the furniture to tug out whatever he deems so comfortable he can’t rip himself out of his sleep long enough to part ways with it.

“Mo,” I breathe when I glance down at the small, blue leather shoe. She was wearing a pair of them last time I spent time with her. Seems forever ago now. And I didn’t notice she left without one, though in my defense, Mo has a tendency to lose socks and shoes alike wherever she goes. “So like a princess,” I sigh, and a small giggle surfaces in my chest and moves past my lips.

I let Cheese carry on with his nap under the coffee bar for now and instead make my way to the door. It’s late. Mo will already be in bed by now. But that just makes this the perfect time to return her slipper and say goodbye. I know she’ll never remember me, but there’s no way I’ll ever forget her. Seeing her lost in a dream in a peaceful sleep, seems like a beautiful parting image of her I can hold tight to for comfort even when she’s no longer just across the hall from me. She’ll be well. Safe. Loved. And most importantly, with her father.

“Dad?” It’s the second time tonight I’m caught completely off guard by the face greeting me on the other side of my door. “What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t really think I’d miss my only daughter’s wedding, did you?” he asks, wrapping both arms around me in a hug I didn’t know I needed until this very moment.

“Dad,” I sigh. “You didn’t have to come all this way for a fake wedding.”

He chuckles, walking past me to come inside. “I didn’t. I came for a real one.” He turns back over his shoulder to smile at me. “Is it not real yet? You know, you two are running out of time to sort this out for yourselves.”

I close the door behind him and follow him deeper into the loft. “Did Lachlan call you? Is that why you’re here?”

My dad’s smile falters ever so slightly. “So, it’s you then who hasn’t sorted it out yet.” He nods slowly, turning away again and making his way toward the sofa. I’m not sure I’m ready to venture back there for another chat tonight.

So, I opt to stand on the other side of the coffee table, directly across from him, instead. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the thing you’ve been scared of your entire life.”

I drop my gaze to stare at the floor. Of course, my father would cut right to the chase. “That someday I would turn out just like mom and leave.” In some ways, it feels like that’s exactly who I’ve become tonight.

“That’s not the thing you’re scared of,” my father says softly. “That’s the thing you tell everyone you’re scared of, including yourself. Because it makes you feel like the thing you’re scared of is in your control. But the truth is, what you fear isn’t that you’ll be the one who leaves. You fear you’ll be the one who gets left. Again.”

“Dad, that’s not it,” I insist, but the words are breaking up before they even come out. Still, I persist, “Yes, mom broke my heart when she walked out on us, but for all her abandonment, you were there to show me how it felt to have someone in your corner unconditionally. I’ve felt safe and loved every day of my life because of you.” I pause to collect my unraveling emotions. “I don’t have abandonment issues. I have issues with being too much like the woman I hate and a fear of becoming so completely like her, I have to hate myself as well.”

My father takes a long breath in and sighs it out loudly. “You have your mother’s lovely hands. And the same shade of deep brown in your beautiful eyes. And you have your mother’s vision for life, the ability to dream big. But Greer, beyond that, I’m afraid you’re your father’s daughter through and through. And that’s why it’s scary. Because I’m not the innocent child who was left behind by circumstance beyond my control. I’m the adult who fell in love, made a promise, gave my all, and did it with a clear and conscious mind, only to be disappointed and betrayed. I fell in love and wasn’t loved in return. And if you’re just like me, maybe you won’t be loved in return either.”

“Dad.” I clear my throat, trying to move the lump that’s been increasing in size with every second of this conversation. “That’s not...I mean, I would love to be just like you...but...” my voice trails off before I can make real sense of anything I’m trying to say.

“You are,” he assures me. “You’re just like me. And not just because we’re both the sort of suckers who would give our all, risk our hearts and do crazy things – like come here – but because we both still think love should be a fairy tale. The only thing you haven’t learned from me yet, is how to believe in it. And you have to, Greer. Take it from the fairy godfather and his magic bookstore,” he pauses to wink at me before his mouth curves into a smile filled with his tender wisdom and he goes on, “you have to believe in the fairy tale. That’s the only way it’ll ever come true.”



LACHLAN

ABBAS STILL HASN’T come back, but Chase has properly taken over my room. After everything that’s happened today, I’m not ready to have him dissect my life and explain it back to me yet. I need time to sort through it myself first.

Monroe is sound asleep in her bed, but her company still fills my heart even in her dreaming state, and I sink into the rocking chair beside her dresser enjoying the view of her beautiful face. She’s smiling in her sleep. There’s something tremendously comforting in knowing she’s so content even her subconscious mind, one that holds the painful moments of her past she’ll probably never fully grasp while awake, can’t conjure anything to take her joy from her.

I let the chair dip back and forth and sink into my body. I’d expected a wide variety of reactions to Greer’s decision to leave. Everything from going numb to collapsing in an ache that could consume me seemed possible when I walked out of her room tonight. But the truth is, I don’t feel either.

I’m not sure if it’s denial or a deep sense of knowing that our story hasn’t finished yet. That despite her best efforts to convince me otherwise, this isn’t the end.

“Lachlan.” Her voice draws my eyes to her. I didn’t even hear her come in.

“Greer.” I get up from the rocking chair and move toward her. A million thoughts fight for their chance to be heard, but not a single one comes out. Instead, I usher her toward the glass doors leading out to the balcony where we won’t wake Monroe.

“I found this while I was packing.” She holds up her hand where I can see it. Even in the dark of night with only a crescent moon to light the sky, I can make it out.

“Monroe’s shoe.”

She nods. “Another twist.” She smiles and it’s the first I notice the tears glistening in her eyes. “In our fairy tale.”

“The one where the prince needs saving?” I ask, smiling at the memory of that conversation. I think it was the first time I understood why she was different. Why we were different for each other. We didn’t share the same perspective, but we were able to show each other, to share in each other’s points of view. It wasn’t about conflict; it was about growth. A small, but significant insight into what we could offer each other.

“The one where they save each other,” she barely breathes the words, but I still hear them. More importantly, I see the ring. My mother’s ring, on her finger.

And it’s all I need to pull her in closer, until my arms are wrapped tightly around her and she’s reaching up to snake her own around my neck. Until I know, without a doubt, she’s mine. And she’s not going anywhere. “There’s one last thing I need from you,” I whisper, touching my forehead to hers, on the verge of getting lost in the depth of her eyes.

“Name it.” She smiles softly, and I know, in this moment, there isn’t anything she wouldn’t do for me. Or my daughter.

“You,” I say. “I need you, all of you, the real you, perfectly restored. Septum piercing and all. Tattoos on display for the world to see along with vibrant streaks of color in your wild hair. No more hiding, no more pretending. Just you.”

She nods ever so slightly. “Done.” Her finger reaches up to graze the edge of my mouth. “But I need you to be wholly you as well. I miss your New York smile and laugh. I like being the one who makes you grin all goofy-like. Even if it is at my expense.”

“I can do that.” I wrap my arms around her tighter. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” she breathes reaching up on her tiptoes to touch her lips softly to mine. “You can kiss me.”

I do. And this time, no thoughts of whether or not it’s as real as it feels linger within me. It’s real. Always has been. From the moment she came storming into the apartment and into my heart.



EPILOGUE

GREER

G “You wanted to see me?” I say, announcing myself when I enter the tearoom. Lachlan’s grandmother is sitting with her back to me at the window. Even after I know she’s heard me, she waits several long moments before turning around to face me.

“I know you have a big day today, so I’ll keep this visit short,” she says curtly, nodding toward the chair beside hers. When I move in closer and have a seat, her eyes zero in on the center of my face and her nose twitches back and forth. “I don’t suppose you’ll be removing that for your wedding?”

“I could,” I offer. “If it bothers you.” Lachlan and I made a deal that I wouldn’t change for Linden’s sake but removing a piercing for a few hours to make his grandmother more comfortable shouldn’t break the promise I made him.

“It’s no bother to me,” she says, turning away to reach something from the stand to the other side of her. “I just wonder if it will clash with this.” When she turns back, she’s holding a magnificent tiara. Unlike my nose ring made of yellow gold, the delicate crown is made entirely of white, adorned with a multitude of aquamarines, the same beautiful shade of blue as the one I wear on my finger. “Of course, there’s still a few hours’ time,” she says. “Perhaps a piece can be located to wear on your face to match the one you wear on your head.” She holds the tiara out toward me. “That is, if you do me the honor.”

My hand moves to my chest, calming my thundering heart. In a million years, I never would have guessed her invite to tea today would result in this moment. “I’m the one who would be honored.”

She smiles demurely, gesturing for me to lean in. “I wore this on my wedding day,” she says with the air of someone traveling back in time even as they speak in the present. “It was given to me then by my fiancé’s grandmother, same as I’m giving it to you now.” She places it carefully onto my head, where it rests softly among my curls. Up until this very moment, I was still debating how I might wear my hair today. But as soon as I catch my reflection in the mirror across the room, I know it’s already perfect just the way it is. Wild and princess-like all at once.

“I’m...speechless.” And that never happens.

She sighs, placing her now empty hands into her lap and folding them. “I like tradition, Greer. I find comfort in it, knowing that no matter how life chooses to unfold, there are celebrations and ways of being which never change. Things we can return to when the outside world leaves us feeling lost or uncertain.” She pauses to collect her thoughts. I get the feeling whatever she still means to say, is hard for her to share. “When Lachlan chose a path less familiar and more challenging, it worried me. Not only for Linden’s sake, but also his own. Then, when he brought you home on a whim, I feared his judgment had been entirely compromised.”

I swallow down the instinct to defend him. To defend us. And I’m glad I do when she continues.

“My fears were for naught, of course. Any fool could see within days of your arrival that choosing you, not only put him back on a path well-travelled, it filled him with strength and confidence and courage – the very sort every good king needs and the very reason our tradition of marriage matters.” She reaches up to touch my face, tenderly placing her palm on my cheek. “I watched my own son blossom in the light of true love and wilt in the loss of it. Lachlan is the reason he’s remained the light-hearted person he is today. But I won’t ever forget the hurt he suffered when our old ways of being wore too heavily on his new bride.” She smiles, but it’s bittersweet. “I like tradition, Greer.

But not nearly as much as I love my boys. As much as I intend to love you. Not just with all of your new ways of being, but because of them.”



LACHLAN

“YOU’RE SURE THE VISIT went well?” I ask Katia for what may well be the twentieth time now.

“I’m positive,” Katia reaffirms. “I know it’s hard to believe me, given I’m telling you your grandmother ordered us to find a nose ring for Greer to match the tiara the Westergaard matriarch passed down to her over tea, but it really is true. All went well.”

“Okay.” I can’t remotely imagine how that visit played out, but I suppose I can let it go for now and get the details later directly from Greer. After the wedding. Until then, I’ve been forbidden by Mallory to contact her. Apparently, despite being a scientist, she’s quite superstitious.

“Is there anything else?” Katia asks, hovering near the door. She’s been trying to leave for several minutes now, I just can’t seem to give up the only tie I have to my bride today.

“Just, tell her I love her, and I can’t wait to see her.” Yes, I’ve become that man.

“Yes, your highness.” She smiles, then takes her chance to escape. It’s strange to think only weeks ago, Katia was someone we avoided at all cost. Now she’s become one of the most invaluable people in our circle. And not just because she’s terrific at her job. She’s become a true friend. One I’ve been eager to help in every way possible since Greer told me about her daughter’s health struggles, including having her daughter spend her days here at the castle with Monroe to ease the burden of finding childcare while also giving Katia more time with her and giving Monroe a much-needed playmate.

“Mom said to tell you to remember to go pee before you head for the altar. You know how nerves affect your bladder,” Chase announces as he comes strolling in, Abbas right behind him.

“Thanks.” I roll my eyes. “Mom have any other words of wisdom for me she hasn’t already shared?” Turns out, our mother was Chase’s plus one. And she in turn, brought her own guest, my stepfather. Chase and I briefly went over how many ways his plan could have backfired, but in the end, he had it to his advantage, that they hadn’t. Everything worked out just the way he said. Greer and I are in love. We’re getting married for real. And I never would have forgiven myself if my mother hadn’t been here for it.

“She also said to stop being stupid and man up already,” he adds. “But I think that was meant for Abbas.” He smirks, patting his friend’s back. “Not to worry though. Greer said she has big plans to make Mal catch her bouquet. Even if she has to pelt her in the face with it.”

“It’s all very romantic,” Soren says dryly, coming in from the balcony where he’s been on the phone making sure everything is in perfect place for the wedding. “Just tell me you got her to agree to acknowledge you as her date, so I don’t have to sit with her at the reception.” He makes a face at me. “She scares me.”

“We agreed to go dateless together,” Abbas says, shoving both hands in his pocket and sighing with defeat.

“I see now where the stop-being-stupid-and-man-up comes into play,” I tease. I’m going to miss these guys and all their antics when they go back home. At least now, I have even more reason to go back and visit and to do so often.

“Alright, if that’s all settled, there’s only one thing left to do,” Soren says, gesturing for the door. “Let’s go get you married, your highness.”

I don't need to be told twice.

The ride to Gerard's goes smoothly and once we arrive, I'm pleased to find everything has been perfectly prepared.

Where before the day was dragging, now time finally flies. Before I know it, I'm standing in the arbor, watching the most magnificent sight walk toward me like a dream becoming real. Greer is more stunning than ever, and my heart threatens to overflow as she walks hand in hand with Monroe down the aisle. My entire world wrapped up in two people.

They make it halfway down the aisle before Monroe slips one slipper from her foot and attempts to carry on without it. Greer laughs, coaxing her back to return her shoe to her bare little toes.

When they make it all the way to me, I hug Monroe close and kiss her cheek, before letting her go to find her seat. It's Papa Reads my daughter chooses to sit with for the ceremony.

"She knows a fairy godfather when she sees one," Greer whispers to me, smiling. "I'm not surprised. After all, she is the true Cinderella of our tale."

I suppose she is. The orphaned girl who lights up the world, claims the heart of the prince and becomes a princess. "I can't believe I never saw it."

"Come on." She winks. "All that always losing her shoes business, what did you think that was about?"

I just smile in response. The preacher just cleared his throat for the second time. I suppose we ought to let him start. After all, I can't wait to marry this woman.

The most precious minutes of my life follow. We exchange vows. Tears. Laughter. And finally, it's time to seal out fate. I bring my lips in to meet hers and just before I kiss her, she says it:

"And they lived happy ever after."

THE END.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I think I came up with the original seed of this story somewhere around high school, maybe shortly after. It was one of those ideas I loved at the time but tucked away and let time bury. Until last year.

Last year was strange. And I know most people felt that way, pandemic and all, but the truth is that my year was strange for so many reasons that had nothing to do with lockdowns or scary viruses (though those things certainly made for a strange setting for my already strange year).

The simple truth is, I lost someone and losing that person made me feel very lost as a result. I needed something to anchor me, somewhere to go home to. And for me, 'no place like home' means 'no place like a story'.

Only I didn't want to write anything that would remind me of the present. And anything new I felt compelled to write seemed to come back around to my current state of mind. I wanted something else. Something that felt safe. And happy. Something from before.

And so began the digging up of old stories. Ideas I collected but never used. Like this one.

Once planted, the roots took hold in my mind all over again, but this time it grew into a tale beyond anything I was expecting. It was a lovely, fantastical trip that did both, help me escape and bring me back. And now that it's complete, I feel more complete again as well.

So, I want to start by acknowledging the strangeness of 2020. While it sent me on a journey riddled with pain, self-doubt, and questions I'll probably never see answered, it also brought to life a story I'm quite proud of. One I'm so excited to get to share with all of you.

As is sometimes the case, I got derailed while writing this one. Thankfully, I had Stephanie (you all may know her better as author S.A. Hussey) to bring me back on track. Wonderful friend that she is, she was also first to brave the very rough draft and give me feedback.

From there followed an amazing group of beta readers – Debi, Rachel, Anna and Mallory P. Thank you all so much – Greer and Lachlan (and Mo!) wouldn't be ready to meet the world without you!

Of course, my writing game would never be strong enough to complete ANY story, if it wasn't for my wildly awesome family who continues to support my dreams on every level. The gratitude I feel for them will fill my heart for the rest of my life.

Also, A Cinderella Twist would be far less than it is were it not for Cheese, who might never have made it into the story had it not been for my friend Mallory L. who has pet rats and thinks they're pretty awesome ;)

Lastly, while it wouldn't stop me from writing, not having an audience to share my stories with would make the experience infinitely less fun – so thank you, dear reader. Thank you for coming along on Greer and Lachlan's fairy tale adventure. I hope you'll join me for more stories in the future ~

Luv,

K



Enjoyed that one? I'd love to hear from you!

Here are two easy ways we can communicate ~
One: [Leave a review](#) Yes! I read them ALL! And good or bad, every scrap of feedback holds value for me. (Plus, reviews hold a literal value in that they *literally* help put food on my table, which I'm quite fond of)

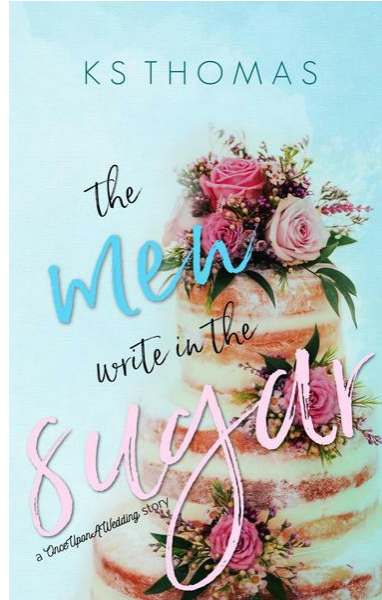
Reviews not your jam? Or you just want more out of this relationship?

There's option two: [Sign up for my newsletter](#) Yay! Now we can be pen pals!

Keep in touch and until next time – stay caffeinated!

Luv, K.

Did you love *A Cinderella Twist*? Then you should read [*The Men Write in the Sugar*](#) by K.S. Thomas!



MILA ANDREWS has one goal. Keep the peace with bridezilla until Sunday.

The wedding will be over. Her maid of honor duties will be complete, and her family drama will finally be a thing of the past.

She'll board a plane, leave Hawaii, and life will be back to normal.

Sunday. Seven days. In Paradise. How hard could it be?

KEATON PHILLIPS has one goal. Convince the groom to end things by Saturday.

The wedding will be off. His best man duties will be complete, and the wrong he committed years before, will finally be made right.

He'll board a plane, leave Hawaii, and life will be back to normal.

Saturday. Six days. To break up a wedding. How hard could it be?

A best man out to destroy the wedding and a maid of honor determined to see the bride through to happy ever after, make for an unlikely pair. But that doesn't stop Mila and Keaton from joining forces - even if it means only one can succeed in their mission before the weekend is over.

Read more at [K.S. Thomas's site](#).

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[A Cinderella Twist](#)

Watch for more at [K.S. Thomas's site.](#)



About the Author

Well, I'm a mommy of one.

A drinker of #coffee (lots and lots of coffee).

And a #Writer of #bookboyfriends and #happyeverafters.

Usually. Sometimes I write other shit too. Children's books. Crime Thrillers. Blogs, apparently.

I'm not one to stifle creativity, I find it only feeds the insanity I'm trying to soothe.

The stereotypical writer through and through,

I find hiding out alone in my office or garden, cut off from society

where I can pursue my obsessive compulsions in peace

& carry on uninterrupted conversations with my imaginary friends

while I sip coffee, to be all the rage.

I like people too.

The real ones.

But I'm shy and often awkward, and I'm told intimidating (trust me, no one is more surprised by this than I am), so I don't show it well.

If we meet – please don't hold this against me.

I use the word f*ck an awful lot. I assure you, I'm not suffering from a limited vocabulary. I'm fluent in two languages and can muddle my way through another few if need be. I just like it. Maybe because I didn't rebel enough as a teenager. Fuck if I know.

These days, life is a solid stream of awesome craziness compliments of my kid and two dogs, and obviously, the getting to write and live my dream business, helps too

Read more at [K.S. Thomas's site](#).